THE
saint
Mystery Library
EDITED BY
LESLIE CHARTERIS
35c
128
LET HER KILL HERSELF
by
RUFUS KING
and other stories

MURDER AGAIN STAYS AT HOME—

MOST OF THE TIME . . . . . .

As an unpleasant woman makes an extremely disturbing discovery, in
Rufus King's LET HER KILL HERSELF

As Sheckley Scodell, "one good blue eye, one good black eye patch, a permit to carry a gun", hunts what appears to be a sick killer, in
Harlan Ellison's FIND ONE CUCKABOO

As a publisher is maneuvered into an uncomfortable position, in
Leighla Whipper's THIS ABOVE ALL

As a thirsty man rewrites history, in
Judith Merril's DRY DUST

in SAINT MYSTERY LIBRARY

NUMBER 11

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THE SAINT MYSTERY LIBRARY

Edited by

LESLIE CHARTERIS

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INTRODUCTION

by Leslie Charteris

Here, once more, is a group of stories with only one thing in common—that each represents a facet of a field casually grouped together as "the" mystery story.

There is no such thing as a representative mystery story of course, just as there is no such thing as *the* animal, *the* bird, or—so I am told—*the* flying saucer. . . . The field has a dozen facets—from the semi-documentary and the pure puzzle to the Spillane and the pseudo-Spillane, the latter appealing principally to our basic frustrations.

One of the stories in this volume, young Harlan Ellison's FIND ONE CUCKABOO, belongs to this latter school. We rejected it for *The Saint Mystery Magazine* which, despite recent surface changes, is still interested in reaching those literate millions in this country whom so many magazine publishers appear to have turned their backs on, but we are running it here in the *Library* —by way of contrast to other stories we've brought you—precisely because it is representative of this trend, which relies on sound effects rather than on subtlety of writing, which this writer is delighted to admit he has no personal empathy for.

Don't misunderstand me. There is a crisp crude forcefulness to much of Ellison's writing, both in his RUMBLE (Pyramid) and in the later THE DEADLY STREETS (Ace), which is noticeably absent in the writing of some of the other representatives of this trend. Now associated with *Rogue* Magazine, Ellison is one of those incredibly prolific young writers, met with in every generation, who either burn themselves out when they are still in their thirties or who—slowing down—attain the critical recognition and the stature

the quality of much of their work at first denies them. We've run a few stories by him in *The Saint* which showed promise of these things to come. The present story, built around the personality of private eye Sheckley Scodell, five foot eleven, 180 lbs, "one good blue eye, one good black eye patch, black hair, a permit to carry a gun", who is hired to find the man who has killed—rather unpleasantly—one of the mad Sadler sisters, is—frankly—in another category.

By way of contrast, there is our lead novel, Rufus King's LET HER KILL HERSELF, which originally appeared in *The Saint* some years ago. Bert Jackson's exact role in the strange grouping of personalities we meet here is, understandably, the subject of considerable conjecture and confusion. Resembling "a somewhat ripening dead-end kid with the build of a wrestler and a rarely-produced infectious smile" his mission in life seems simply to keep an eye on young Ernest Dean. But—as we find out—he has other things on his mind. Very much so.

Happy reading.

L. C.

LET HER KILL HERSELF

by Rufus King

THE MOTEL, hugging the shore of the lazy sea, was called Black's. Located on the Gold Coast between Miami Beach and Ft. Lauderdale it offered in its single-storied fashion luxurious living at a good stiff price, specially now in February which was the height of the season.

There were the customary swimming pool, arranged like a kidney bean, a private beach, a cocktail room that was totally atmospheric and, if you were silly enough to patronize it, a small restaurant that served luncheon snacks.

On the beach proper, artistically conceived as a thatched job from Pago-Pago, was the combined

living quarters and beach wear shop of the lifeguard, Oscar Bjorgsen. He lived there, not with a wife, as yet, but with Jimmy Hart, the night shift bartender of the cocktail lounge. They also shared a sporty convertible and their melting point towards dames could be reached with the glow from a match.

As Jimmy often remarked during the next six months, at which time a fresher conversation piece developed in the form of a poisoned divorcee from Newark, nothing could have been smoother than Thursday night. The regulars were all in their regular places and he noted, while stirring two manhattans for the Cardigan bags, the last element of the Dean-Lang-Situation coming into the lounge.

She was registered as Miss Theda Sangford and the briefest glance stamped her as a woman of mystery, her looks being darkly exotic and her costumes as revealing as a crystal ball. Naturally, she slinked, her insurable legs and contest-winner torso giving all of her movements the liquid coordination of quicksilver. You were prepared for about any sort of a contralto foreign accent and were consequently rocked when her voice turned out to be solid Bronx as chirped by a bird.

The bar closed at two, and just before the hour Miss Sangford said to Jimmy: "Drop off a bottle on your way by, will you, Jimmy?"

"The usual?"

"Yes. Maybe you'd better make it two."

"Glad to, Miss Sangford. In about half an hour?"

"That'll be fine."

Jimmy put the bar to bed, and Eric Havermay, who had the bar concession, took the night's receipts and they drank a brew together.

"I've got a feeling," Havermay said, "I've got a feeling that something's coming up and I don't like it. It's a bad situation."

"Young Dean?" Jimmy asked.

"Both him and his mother—and Spang and Sangford."

"Setups like that are a dime a dozen down here, and you know it."

"I do and I know what comes of them. Trouble—sometimes in big red letters. Who's the bottles for?"

"Sangford. She wants me to drop them on the way by."

"She's swimming in it right now."

"Well?"

"Well, just this. It's what I've been talking about. It's exactly when it happens. Let them put away enough of that stuff and we're in court as homicide witnesses. Not one time when it's ever happened down here have they been sober."

Jimmy said again: "Well?"

Havermay wrestled with a few sparse, sterling shreds of an early New England conscience, one that had been a shining field, sumptuous with a crop of basic virtues and tailormade niceties. But a man had to live. And he had to get it while the getting was good. For a buck could stretch a little because a buck was a buck. He didn't like to do this stretching and would often say so in the didactic tones of a moralist. But he did it nevertheless. She was a good customer—good for twenty bucks a night.

"All right," he said. "Let her knock herself out then. Let her kill herself if she wants to."

Havermay left. The stock was padlocked and the lights extinguished, with the exception of one torchere on a driftwood stand near the door. Jimmy killed a palmetto bug—Florida for flying cockroach—stepping on its paper-thin armorplate and kicking it under the duckwalk.

The bar was in order, the ashtrays clean and rightly spaced along its length, the glasses cleanly clear, and in the shadows of the night-filled room a white hand moved. Its pale arc hovered over near the table where young Dean always sat with his "watchdog" Bert Jackson, and Alice Spang, and Jimmy went over to the woman who was seated there.

"It's closing time, Miss Fernandez," he said.

She was an attractive woman in a heavy way, dark-eyed and dark-haired and dressed on the ornamental side, with a bank of expensive bracelets on her left forearm, and with large earrings of intricate gold.

"Yes," she said, "I know. I am depressed. There is a mist, very black. Not for me, you understand, but for others. For that alive young man and the girl he should marry. I grope after their future, but my fingers touch nothing."

Jimmy summed up his knowledge of her. Rich, very possibly a Porto Rican of unusually distinguished ancestry, a good but never excessive tipper, a conservative drinker—neither a man snatcher nor a table hopper. With a strong hobby, as his lifeguard roommate had told him, for collecting shells along the tide edge. Her odd way of expressing herself was, at worst, a minor quirk. But this "mist" business verged on the screwball. What Jimmy had failed to realize was that Miss Fernandez was also an observant woman in her own strange way and to an all but mathematical degree.

"I stay here," she went on. "And I think. You do not mind?"

"Not a bit."

"You are kind. Good night."

"Good night."

There was no moon and the coral walk past the unit patios was silver against velvet grays and the surface of the swimming pool was silver, and amber light diffused through the Sangford unit's Venetian blinds.

Hart pressed the door button and heard the soft chime and her voice in its birdlike chirp call: "Come in."

He entered an empty living room and her voice called again from behind a closed door: "Jimmy? Just leave the bottles, will you?"

"On the desk, Miss Sangford."

He placed the bottles on the desk and then under a swift compulsion which he could not at the moment nor at any later time understand called: "Miss Sangford?"

"What, Jimmy?"

"Have you been bothered by any—well, what you might call premonitions? Like, say, groping around in a mist?"

"Not me, Jimmy boy. Tonight the world is my oyster. Forget the creeps, pal, and go home and sleep it off."

Jimmy went, a lithe shade through the stillness of the semi-tropical night and the memory of her laughter did not reassure him, for the feeling that Havermay had felt was dominant, and the crack about mists by Miss Fernandez and the look of seeing in her eyes.

II

THE NIGHT rolled on with the homecoming of the late ones from the clubs and dancing casinos. Young Ernest Dean and Alice Spang, and Ernest's watchhound Bert Jackson, came back from dancing in the Coral Room of the Chalefont Towers and a familiar look passed between Ernest and Bert. It was from habit entirely understandable by each and a cartoonist would have symbolized it with pupils in the shape of dollar marks.

Bert Jackson's exact position in the Dean menage was the subject of considerable conjecture among the cocktail brigade. In appearance Bert resembled a somewhat ripening dead-end kid with the build of a wrestler and a rarely-produced infectious smile that would break through the dark glower. He wore expensive clothes and his manners were honed to an edge that would have brought a fan-flick of approval from Emily Post.

He had a fetish for cleanliness, going to indescribable lengths of care and detail about the scrubbed freshness of his person, and somewhere in the dimming past lay a background of both money

and gentility.

The women section of the regulars considered this role of Little-Shepherd-to-sonny-boy as just so much eye-wash, even though Ernest's pockets were commonly known to be loaded with his mother's money and an occasional break either at the track or in one of the sub-rosa gaming traps further increased his supply of funds.

No, the gossipers decided that Bert's real job lay in having an affair with Mama Dean. This struck them as being both piquant and wholly just, Mrs. Dean being a widow and quite able to stack up with the best of them. With her slim, well-kept figure, and shoulder-length hair brushed under and tinted a pale gold it was a commonplace for her to be mistaken as Ernest's sister, especially as his manner held a touch of grave maturity at odd variance with his actual age.

Bert sheered off into the Dean apartment, and Ernest went with Alice into the adjoining Spang patio. They sat on a bamboo chaise lounge and in the darkness under the pinpoint individuality of the stars they were very close and in each other's arms. Their voices were quiet, very low. But they were not low enough to be muted in the hush which was complete but for the slumbrous break of surf along the shore.

Ernest held her more tightly with the warmth of her cheek like fire against his because the pain of his wanting was a terrible thing.

"I guess you know why I drink," he said. "At the tough times, I mean. I get so drunk I don't remember the next day what I've done, and what I've said. Everything's an absolute blank."

"Bert's paid to stop you from that, isn't he?"

"Yes, and to hand in the field reports to mother. Well, he's paid to forget about it too. *By me.* I tell her I've lost at the horses or dice, and then I'll hand it over to him to cover up for me." He added with the acid intensity of youth, in a swelter of self dis-

gust that gagged him like bitter gall: "I'm no good. Really, Alice, I mean it. I'm not honest with anybody. Even with you. She's the most wonderful mother in the world. She's done everything for me, made every sacrifice—"

With a wisdom beyond her nineteen years Alice kept her counsel. Actually she regarded Mrs. Dean as the blood-kin of those cannibal fish who devour their own young.

But she did say: "She'll never let you marry. Ernest, she'll never give you up."

"I know, and there are times when I hate her. I've never said this to a living soul before, Alice. But sometimes I've wished her dead."

"You can't help that, Jimmy. It's the chained feeling. It's that way with me. I go crazy at times and want to rebel when mama shoves me on some rich old wreck. Then her heart—"

Ernest nodded. "I know. Mother's too."

One thing that Mrs. Dean and Mrs. Spang had strongly in common was their hearts. Each had a convenient "condition" as one of the leash effects that could be brought into play at will, Mrs. Dean succumbing to dizziness followed by a faint, and Mrs. Spang being adroit at a frightening spell of last-minute gasps. Both women kept on hand appropriate props to bolster the illusion. Mrs. Spang was never without her ampules of amyl nitrate, and Mrs. Dean had ever within her reach a vial of strychnine pills.

Ernest belted himself still further. "I'm not even a man. But I will be, Alice—now that I've got you. I'll clear up one mess I'm in that you don't even know about, that I never want you to know about. I'm clearing it up in the morning for good."

A low whistle came from the Dean apartment, signalling that Mrs. Dean was awake.

"That's Bert."

They hurriedly, but still moltenly, kissed goodnight and Ernest left.

III

THE WATER was warm and infinitely soothing to Miss Sangford's admirable body, in particular to her head which was entertaining a convention of riveters. It was also entertaining a few doubts. She felt uncertain that her course was the right one. It had been simple enough to trace him. A note in one of the cafe society gossip columns had taken care of that. But this anger, this decision to smash, to rip things wide simply for the balm of a revenge which would surely prove costly—was that smart?

She closed her eyes and in the comforting water was in a world alone, and with this sense of aloneness a familiar fear stole over her. Suddenly the sense of solitude was gone but the fear remained, increasing a thousand times. She screamed as the hands closed about her ankles.

The familiar hands.

The water, as the grip tightened and gave a yank, choked short her scream.

It was many hours later when dawn paled the east while bands of pistache and cerise roped low above the horizon of the sea, and Miss Fernandez, brilliant in a flamingo swim suit, walked down to the tide edge for a dip and to gather shells.

Actually it was an almost impossible hour for the search as the air and sea and sand were bathed in a pale luminosity rather than true light. But it was a physical action, like fingering beads, one which kept her body occupied while her real concentration lay in her thoughts.

A movement off to her left in the Dean's corner unit of the motel caught her attention. It registered itself as the somewhat careful closing of the apartment's beach door. It was being pulled gently to from the inside. And then almost at once within the perimeter visible to her shell-seeking eyes, appearing over its circumference as she moved forward, was the body of a woman, and shock confused her while the knowledge slowly registered that it was

Miss Sangford and that Miss Sangford was dead.

Miss Fernandez's notion of corpse-discovery procedure in the United States was exclusively based on Spanish translations of paperbacks from which she had gleaned the inflexible rule that never must anything be touched on the spot until the police arrive. Also, apart from being ignorant as to how to go about doing it, she did not consider using artificial respiration. Having passed through numerous revolutions she considered herself expert at recognizing permanent death when she saw it.

Speed in informing the proper authorities was important. She fished a coin purse from her bag of shells and going to a telephone booth attached to the lifeguard's shop dialed the operator and asked to be connected with the police.

"An emergency?" the operator asked.

"Very. A woman. She has been drowned."

"I will connect you directly with Chief Duggan's home. The men at the station will be out on patrol."

Bill Duggan, in his thirties, was steeped in the leisureliness of Florida living but in spite of a retarded outlook on the illegal antics of his fellow men he was thoroughly up to date on most new phases of criminology. The drowned were no novelty for him. Before joining the force he had been a lifeguard and his knowledge of crazy bathers, sane fish and wholesome, sticky, tangy salt water was encyclopaedic.

When he reached Black's private beach, accompanied by the handsome hulk of Officer Alan Day, he found Miss Fernandez standing in guardian vigil beside the body.

She spoke in a composed tone. "One thought at first, for the briefest moment, that she slept. But no. As the gentlemen can observe, she is dead."

Duggan observed. The body, clothed in the scantiest of swim suits, lay on one side close to the surf. There was no bathing cap and dark strands of hair partially masked a profile which by its suggestion

of tautness indicated that rigidity had begun. Duggan knelt, and confirmed immediately that rigor mortis already was attacking the face and jaw.

"Will I get to work?" Day asked.

Duggan studied the sand pattern dried on the flesh. He brushed back the clinging hair the better to see the features. His fingers paused, then cautiously explored the scalp. There was a degree of dampness at the hair base which the high humidity of the atmosphere had kept from drying out, even though to judge from the onset of rigor death had occurred at least two hours previously.

He leaned quite closely to the hair and sniffed. He found some bruise marks which interested him around the ankles. He took a notebook from his pocket, and turned back to Miss Fernandez.

"May I have your full name, please?" he asked.

"Loreta Janeta Fernandez."

"You are a guest here, Miss Fernandez?"

"For one week and for one week more. Then I am home again in San Juan."

"Do you know who this is?"

"She too is a guest. A Miss Theda Sangford from the city of New York. Beyond that I am ignorant but for an incident of uncertain value. I hesitate to speak up. He is a good, a nice young man but badly controlled by his mother. You have the expression—a mama's boy?"

"Yes?"

"It would be distasteful to me to believe he would permit this poor one to drown. You understand?"

"Perfectly." Duggan smiled faintly. "Who is he, and why do you think he may have?"

"He is Ernest Dean. He is a youth very stalwart in the extreme but with blood that turns to milk beneath his mother's touch." Miss Fernandez pointed, emphasizing the gesture with a deepening earnestness of expression. "I behold the movement of that door. It is being pulled shut from within. This will be but a minute ago at the hour when no-

body is aboard. You will weigh the event of this door judicially? With compassion? You will consider his youth and that in all virtue he may have tried to save her? In vain. And then in panic, upon observing my approach, he fled?"

It was curious, Duggan thought, how patly a layman could tie up a homicide and present it with an absurd assurance to a trained observer.

"Evidently you know of some connection between this woman and Mr. Dean?" he said.

Miss Fernandez looked somberly wise. She struggled to encapsule within a few words a panorama of a situation which had, for a considerable time now, been disturbing her inwardly.

"It is deeper than the shop-worn convention one calls the eternal triangle. Its roots lie in the character of that dangerous woman."

Duggan stared at her levelly.

"This woman? Miss Sangford?"

She expressed a shrug of impatience at his ineptitude in failing to grasp instantly the implacable chains that fettered young Dean.

"No, no, in his mother. She is rich, but fantastically rich. Her jewels alone are worth a fortune. She has put the world at his feet, but he dare not explore it without her visa."

"What I suppose you are getting at, Miss Fernandez, is that Miss Sangford made a serious attempt to snag the boy."

"What else? Not alone I but all of the guests knew it to be true. I was in the cocktail lounge on the evening when this greedy one arrived. How shall I tell you?"

She looked at him, and beyond him, and back to the scene of Theda Sangford's initial entrance one week before into the cocktail lounge, adjusting the main characters—young Dean and Bert—in their proper place on stage, which was a table beneath a mounted marlin on the west wall. She pictured herself seated near enough for observation, but quite

beyond earshot of what was being said. Then she brought the body of Theda Sangford from its stiffening posture on the sand into an effect of life that was convincing despite her outlandish way of expressing herself.

"One watched her entrance which was in the manner where every step is a provocation. One watched her pause, and survey the field. One watched her remove a cigarette from a jeweled case and seat herself on a banquette adjoining the table of Mr. Dean. It was a display of virtuosity which would have brought an acclaim to a Cleopatra. Almost immediately she asked him for a light. Ah—and the impact!"

"On Dean?"

"I shall tell you this. You may regard it as equivalent to the effect upon a man which would be produced by a cobra with business in its eye."

"Well after all," Duggan said equably, "if there was an initial aversion on his part—I'm afraid I just don't understand."

She said with courteous impatience that he did not understand his own sex—nor did he evidently comprehend the power of sex in itself, particularly when it was wielded by an accomplished woman. This, of course, was absolute slander but Duggan let it pass.

"You will accept that by last night she had him in her power." Miss Fernandez launched into the full-bodied stream of her narrative. "You will regard me at the hour of cocktails seated at a vantage point from which one aspect of this tragedy could be observed very clearly."

"Just let me get this straight. You're talking now about last night?"

"I am. To my right, at their accustomed table beneath that stiff, stuffed fish are seated Mr. Dean and the leechlike Mr. Jackson."

"Why leechlike?"

"He is the agent engaged by Mrs. Dean to report every movement of her son. So they sit there and

they solace themselves with double daquiris while awaiting the arrival of Miss Spang."

"Double daquiris. I see. How was young Dean? Would you say that he was drunk?"

"He had taken too much to drink. But it is not Miss Spang who accepts the waiting chair. It is this poor one, here." Fernandez lowered a glance of Christian commiseration on the dead. "I must tell you that Mr. Jackson is temporarily gone through that door on which is the silhouette of a running man.

"For the instant I am bemused by Francine, the barmaid, who is producing at my table a rum punch. When again I study Mr. Dean it is to see his face is as white as the under portion of that terrible fish. He is saying, forgetting his true gentility: 'Shut up!' And this unfortunate one employs upon her lips a smile of pure evil and remarks: 'By daybreak, understand? Be there or you will be a very, very sorry little boy'." Miss Fernandez concluded simply: "She stands. She goes. It is the curtain of her scene."

It also, Duggan realized, planted Dean squarely on the spot.

"You said one aspect, Miss Fernandez. Were there others?"

The sun, with leisure, rose above the ocean's rim. The sands were fired with gold and only the flesh of Miss Sangford retained a mortal pallor. The tide on ebb sighed backwards into the sea, and Miss Fernandez emerged with another small bouquet from the dark garden of her thoughts.

"After dinner, at the hour when the television is in force, seated on the banquette next to mine are Mrs. Dean and Mrs. Spang. Ah, that one!"

Duggan asked with reasonable uncertainty: "Which?"

"Mrs. Spang, the mother of that charming, fragrant girl. A woman, you must grasp, of ice with a cold prettiness that is beginning to melt with age. As one woman has put it to me, she is a Custer in

Schiaparelli embarked on her ultimate stand."

"Busted?"

"So it is said. It is either a marriage of importance or the end. The Dean fortune exposes itself as her last gun."

"Well, from what you've told me he seems willing enough. Or was Miss Sangford a serious threat?"

"You will consider the conversation which I overheard during a moment when the scenario on the television screen concerns itself with pantomime. You will listen, please, to Mrs. Dean: 'If Ernest were to marry and leave me I would cut his allowance off completely.' To this decision Mrs. Spang replies: 'I suppose you know best, dear. But that woman is determined. Why don't you go to Nassau until she leaves?' And now, the crux. It is the voice of Mrs. Dean: 'I shall meet this danger in my own manner and *never by running away*'."

Miss Fernandez reached the end of her disclosures and obviously waited for Duggan to take up the ball. What she expected, he imagined, was a swift descent on his part upon young Dean, who being a fine, upstanding American youth—no matter how badly mother-ridden—would obligingly admit that he had met Miss Sangford by appointment at daybreak. Under the harmless cloak of taking an early morning dip, of course. It would then be revealed that the dip had backfired and that young Dean, callowly panic stricken, had taken off for home base.

IV

Duggan was saved from disillusioning Miss Fernandez as to the number of holes in this amateur's slice of Swiss by a group strolling towards them from the motel. It was led by Officer Day. Duggan explained to Roth, a police technician, what pictures to take—specifying in particular closeups of the ankles and the hair, and the patterns left on the dead woman's flesh by the dried sand. He suggested that they first be outlined, say with a lipstick.

He wanted a complete set of Miss Sangford's

fingerprints and to have them transmitted telephotographically immediately to New York and Washington, after which the boys could remove the body to the morgue space of Tropical to be held for the medical examiner.

He left a final suggestion that a detailed search be made of the shoreline to the north and south. If the ocean had been kind enough to disgorge it, he would also like the bathing cap which was missing from Miss Sangford's head. Presumably it had been lost during the usual convulsive struggles that precede a death by drowning. Then he went to the manager's apartment and called up Sibley.

Dr. Frank Sibley, pathologist at Tropical General Hospital, was the appointed associate medical examiner for South Broward county. He was young, he was a perfectionist, and he was adroit. Homicide held for him the peculiar fascination of a Chinese puzzle, one of the ring sort which requires the most delicate patience and care to solve.

Duggan explained.

He said to Sibley in conclusion: "One thing I wish you'd do at once, Frank. Subject the heart to the Gettler test."

Sibley was impressed.

"So it's one of those?"

"I think it is. Let me know, will you, as soon as you've checked? As early this afternoon as possible?"

"Look, Bill, the solutions for that test have to stand overnight. There will be nothing on it decisive before tomorrow morning."

Waldo Barcombe, the motel manager, came into the room from his quarters and looked frowsily at Duggan. Waldo's job was largely titular as his wife Kitty did the managing and the actual work of keeping the place running smoothly. In spite of his pose before the public Waldo was not in reality an affable man, being given to blanket dislikes such as loathing all southerners, all jobs where the slightest

physical activity was required, and any lack of tastiness in the preparation by Kitty of his meals. He was an all round coddled egg.

"Hello Bill," he said. "Kitty's told me. There's always one like that Miss Sangford. A trouble maker."

"Tell me about her."

"What do we know about any of them? What they tell us, that's all. She had the dough and she laid it on the line."

"For how long?"

"Two weeks."

"What else?"

"A New York address in the east Fifties."

"How about mail since she's been here?"

"No mail."

"Phone calls?"

Waldo picked up the telephone and said to the girl on the front office switchboard: "About Miss Sangford, Mabel—"

"Isn't it terrible!"

"No, it isn't. She probably took a swim while potted and got what was coming to her."

"Oh Mr. Barcombe! The Bible says—"

"Never mind what the Bible says. Tell me if she received any telephone calls while she's been here."

"Not while I was on."

"Check with Pete about nights."

"I have. That is, he mentioned it to me only this morning when I took over. Not a call, and what with her figure he thought it peculiar."

Waldo hung up and relayed all this to Duggan.

"What made you say she had it coming to her?" Duggan asked.

"Latching on to young Dean for one thing. Trying to take him away from Alice Spang. Boy, has that guy's mama got the dough. She's even got a watch-dog-bodyguard to ride herd on him, she keeps him so loaded. No kidding."

"Bert Jackson? Is that his name?"

"You know about it?"

"A Miss Fernandez briefed me."

"That bird. She flops around in fogs feeling for things. I think she's half cracked."

"Possibly. Let me in Miss Sangford's apartment, will you, Waldo.

Waldo took a pass key from the desk drawer.

"Let's go."

While Duggan searched the Sangford unit with the zealot nicety of a Carrie Nation sniffing out a dram, the sun rose higher into the warmth of morning while the motel stirred to life and to the impact of snowballing rumors.

Among the feminine division these embraced such positively known facts as that that vampire had accidentally drowned—she had committed suicide—she had been dragged beneath the waves: (a) by Mrs. Dean, (b) by Mrs. Spang, (c) by Alice Spang, (d) by Ernest—she had fought madly for her life and had been bruised all over, several people knowing of several people who had heard her perfectly ghastly dying shrieks (sea gulls)—she had succumbed without a struggle while in a disgraceful drunken stupor—with the only point of complete agreement among the ladies being that Officer Day was a doll.

The local press—Ft. Lauderdale, Hollywood, Miami—was as yet chilled about the job and the incident was delicately dropped into the category of a sadly drowned tourist. As such it was to be quietly underplayed, with the virtuous hope being advanced that inadequate swimming winter visitors to our golden strands would take proper heed and would quit venturing into our gentle, delightful, azure blue sea before the efficient lifeguards came on duty and would thus be on hand to fish them out of it again.

Duggan ended his inch by inch search and had Roth take such photographs as he felt the county prosecutor could use in evidence. These included three sets of fingerprints on one of the bottles of

Scotch which Jimmy had left. Duggan wanted them put through the mill.

Then he said to Waldo: "I'm about ready for young Dean."

Waldo looked at him with the pleading eyes of an unfed seal.

"Take it easy with the kid, will you, Bill? They're paying top seasonal rental and what's more she's got enough of the stuff to slam the pick of the legal hot shots in your face—if you step out of line."

He would not, Duggan promised, step out of line, and they walked to the Dean apartment and Waldo pressed the button for the chime. The sun smashed purple flame into the bougain-villaea in one corner of the patio and only the surf on the shore made any sound, and the chime died into this silence. Then the door opened and Duggan had his first view of Mrs. Dean.

Even though the hour was only half past eight she presented a picture of competent preservation. Her gold hair shone from its brushing and the expensive delicacy of an imported brilliantine. Her face was in order, and her deceptively simple cotton dress suggested the freshness of jonquils on a sunny hill.

Waldo smiled managerially. "You've heard, I suppose," he said.

"Yes, I've heard. These lamentable, these stupid accidents!"

She played dociley along in her soft, rich voice while her eyes from their long-lashed corners flickered across Duggan.

"Always so tragic," she agreed. "Especially with the middle aged."

"Middle—Miss *Sang*ford?"

"Oh easily, I should think, a contemporary of my own. Won't you come in?"

"Thank you, I can't. I've the usual thousand things to do, and now with *this* on top of it. I just wanted to introduce Bill Duggan, our Chief of Police. Then I'll run along."

Mrs. Dean extended a firm, cold hand. "Chief Duggan?"

"Mrs. Dean."

They shook hands and Waldo ran along to attend to his thousand things—which were nothing more arduous than a head dive back onto a foam rubber mattress. Duggan followed Mrs. Dean into the living room where she asked him to sit down and then arranged herself in a formal posture on a lounge. She sat there, very composed, and observed him with a polite attention.

"I would like to talk with your son, Mrs. Dean."

"Ernest is asleep, Mr. Duggan. Drugged, really. He suffered a rather shocking experience this morning. Around daybreak to be exact. It came as a climax to a heavy night and the combination jolted his nerves severely. I insisted on his taking two of my pills. Luminol."

Duggan smiled back at her understandingly. A good deal more understandingly than she knew. He admired her technique in launching the attack against himself, the enemy.

"The shocking experience. You refer to his appointment with Miss Sangford?"

Mrs. Dean gazed at him steadily with eyes that were not quite violet, not quite green, and the social set of her smile remained unaltered.

"Of course you would know about that. I believe one of the barmaids—Francine—spread the word? Or anyone else having cocktails within earshot of Miss Sangford's voice. Have you ever noticed the muted quality of some bars, especially those that go in for Liberace lighting like the one here?"

"Yes, I have. An added decibel of sound in a person's voice—"

"Exactly. As for the rendezvous it never took place. Miss Sangford was lying on the sand, drowned, when Ernest went down to the shore. As I have said, the shock of it added to a terrific hangover—"

"I can well imagine." He added sympathetically:

"It must have been pretty tough to make him fail to notify either the management or the police."

She looked back at him calmly and permitted him to light the cigarette she had taken from a box on the coffee table between them.

"Obviously that would occur to you, Mr. Duggan. It would occur to anybody. I was awake when Ernest returned. I heard him being violently ill by the beach door. You may have noticed its upper half is glassed? I went to him and could see the beach through the window panes. I saw that Porto Rican woman, Miss Fernandez, find Miss Sangford and then saw her go to the telephone booth at the lifeguard's shop. The call was to you, wasn't it, Mr. Duggan?"

"Yes."

"I felt confident that it would have been, and gave my full attention to Ernest. Bert helped me—Mr. Jackson, my son's friend. After we'd put Ernest to bed I looked out on the beach and you and that other officer had taken over."

Duggan let the explanation rest in a quiet that grew prolonged to a limit where the smile was gone from Mrs. Dean's carnation-painted lips.

She began to feel it intolerable and said: "Well, Mr. Duggan?"

"Did you also hear your son when he left for the beach, Mrs. Dean?"

"I am a very light sleeper and there is little that I do not hear at night. Ernest got up and went out not more than a quarter of an hour before I heard him return. In the condition that I've told you." Her expression grew more strained. "Is it the reason for the rendezvous that is puzzling you?"

"In a way."

"Now really, Mr. Duggan, with a woman of her type, why should it? My son is a perfectly normal young man."

"It is the secrecy that has me bothered."

"Nonsense. Were you never, at Ernest's age, shall

we say similarly involved?"

"No, neither then nor now. You see I'm still a bachelor, Mrs. Dean."

It took a full moment for the implication to sink in and the effect of it on Mrs. Dean was appalling.

"Bachelor—bachelor?"

"Surely you knew that Miss Sangford was your son's wife?"

Her words were spaced like the death roll of a heart slowing down.

"I do not believe you, Mr. Duggan."

He took a paper from his jacket pocket and handed it to her.

"The marriage certificate," he said. "She had hidden it rather cleverly, among facial tissues. Evidently she was afraid it would be searched for."

He did not, she noticed, directly specify that the search would have been by Ernest, although obviously seeming to imply it. Her eyes lingered unbelievingly on the date, which was two months ago, and on the place, which was the borough of Manhattan.

"I did not know," she said with difficulty. She managed to stand up. "Would—would you be so kind as to leave me, Mr. Duggan? I find it impossible to concentrate."

"Perhaps after an hour or two, Mrs. Dean?"

"Thank you. Surely then, yes."

"If you will let me have the marriage certificate, please?"

"This? Oh, yes." The habit of power, the years of domination which, since her husband's death, she had enjoyed upon her solid, unassailable pedestal of a woman of social standing and of great wealth, all of those assets were returning in freshening trickles and she said in her normal manner: "Why do you want it?"

He placed the certificate in his pocket. "Possible evidence, Mrs. Dean," he explained.

"Of what?"

"Motive."

"I may seem stupid, but motive for what?"

"The murder of your son's wife, Mrs. Dean."

V

THE HOUR WAS ten-thirty of that Friday morning when Dr. Sibley, fully breakfasted and accompanied by a stenographer entered the morgue in the new wing of Tropical General. They observed, resting on a broad table equipped with running water and adequate drainage, its surface brilliant under a flood of fluorescent lighting, the unclothed body of Miss Sangford.

From glassed-in cabinets along the wall Sibley selected in addition to the usual tools, a couple of Erlenmyer flasks. He prepared a silver nitrate solution, a potassium iodide solution and a starch citrate mixture. He took delicate precautions to insure that water would not contaminate the blood, wiping dry the surface of the heart, and the knife, and making certain that the pipette and the receiving flasks were dry.

He did such things as had to be done and then set the solutions to one side. He looked at his watch. Possibly towards tomorrow morning he could let Duggan know the result.

By noon he had completed such other tests and observations as the regular autopsy procedure made mandatory. Two things he was prepared to let Duggan definitely know: Miss Sangford had been pregnant, and Miss Sangford had been drunk.

Duggan digested this preliminary report of Sibley's during a luncheon of broiled snook in the company of Officer Day.

"It's wrapped up," Day said. "The rest is mere routine."

Duggan deposited a fish bone on his plate and helped himself to some more coleslaw.

"You sound like Miss Fernandez," he said.

"I do? Well what do you know?"

"Until the Gettler test comes through we're stick-

ing our necks out a mile if we so much as point a finger at him."

"I don't get it. Take the setup. Money-bags Mama ready to cut his allowance off if he steps out of line, and in her book wedding bells spell for whom the bell tolls—Boy, am I good."

"About as good as last week's herring."

"Nuts, Chief. What happens? He gets potted and wakes up married to Little Egypt and starts paying her off to keep her from telling Mama. And I suggest that Bloodhound Jackson is the go-between."

"That much I'll grant you."

"Chief, a child could do this with his little hands tied behind his back. Seriously, Mama carts him down here to chill to death for the winter and he runs into the Spang number and he's gone. *Real gone.*"

"Okay. And he's a married man."

"What's so funny about that?"

"I wouldn't know."

"So Sangford trails him. Why? Because she comes into her wits on one fine morning and finds out that she is in a delicate condition."

"Brother, are you slicing it nice."

"All right, so I was brought up refined like. Well, she knows the score and she figures it this way and she figures it that. If Mama finds out her apple pie is married he is out on his neck and headed for skid row. But. I say *but.*"

"Sure, sure—and the ace in the hole is a darling grandchild who—to use your refined language—is two months en route on the Storkville trolley and the fact makes Mama Dean starry-eyed with joy and her flinty heart just melts. Al, you have not only read a book. You have seen a movie."

"Cut it, Chief. Now what does Sangford find? She finds her legally wedded husband overboard about the Spang dame. So she takes second choice and says you will pay me off and pay through the nose. I will then quietly divorce you or get an annulment,

whichever you like. The kid says he'll pay and she fixes it for the payoff to be down at the beach this morning at daybreak."

"Why? Why daybreak, Alan?"

"Can I read the minds of a couple of crazy kids?"

"If Sangford was a kid, bud, I'm a baby movie star."

"All right, so she's got a few miles on her. They close the deal and go for a swim to make the meeting look good, and lover boy sees it's a golden opportunity for yanking her under—with his troubles, big and little, gone forever. I'm telling you that Oswald Pinker, our worthy county solicitor, will love it. He'll be delirious."

"He'll be psychotic if we give him the case as it stands. It's still as phoney as a hustler's smile."

Miss Fernandez drew reflectively towards the end of her luncheon. She was a hearty eater and a deliberate one with very few epicurean tastes, and the food of the motel's restaurant did not desolate her appetite. There was an air of peculiar waiting. The room was unusually full and it occurred to her that death and the police had fused the variegated guests into a group which instinctively herded together and set itself apart as a unit, as being something special.

The focal point of the diners naturally was the table at which Mrs. Dean sat with her son and Bert Jackson. Miss Fernandez cordially approved of Mrs. Dean's decision upon this public appearance, terming it in a sense the bravado of position. Of Mrs. Dean's position in the social world, and this carrying of her own environment like a shield of glass around her.

Of secondary interest were the Spangs. Both the mother and daughter offered that setness of expression which renders the otherwise superb waxwork figures of Madame Tussaud's just short of being lifelike. They accomplished the physical acts of eating and speaking under the impossible effect of being in

a state of arrested motion. Mrs. Spang displayed her mildewing prettiness in full exhibition style but it was no go, nor was the virginal loveliness of Alice any more than a flower-frail veiling for the gut ripping hurt of her love.

Miss Fernandez smiled.

The knowledge that Ernest Dean and Theda Sangford had been man and wife had passed the rumor stage and was an accepted fact. There was a fascination, even a charm about murder and a hundredfold so when the protagonists were right under your eyes.

Any notion of accidental drowning had been thrown out of the window. And over all—it was like viewing an artist on the high trapeze who at any moment might miss and plummet to death—was the chilling cliche that murder breeds. That it breeds *if* and *as* necessity dictates—until the hand of the killer is stilled.

The seeming inactivity of the police, and of the county solicitor's office, and what appeared to be the blase attitude of their dawdling, was considered curious. By Miss Fernandez most of all. She considered it not only curious, but dangerous.

Such were the red wraiths in her mist, tentatively identified but with not enough clear assurance to permit her to indulge in solemn warnings, for her to say: You must guard yourself by light of heaven and in dark of night when the variety of death is legion. You must even look beneath the mask of love.

Would she be believed? Miss Fernandez sighed deeply over a forkful of lime pie. No more, certainly, than people had heeded the warnings of Cassandra or any of the ancient seeresses when the prophesies were not a rosy pink.

One gesture, however, she managed to make upon leaving the dining room when she found herself alongside of Alice Spang. Briefly she pressed the girl's hand and murmured: "Courage, little one! Take heart."

VI

By three o'clock the wind had freshened in the south, rolling up moderate combers to fracture in spumy sheets along the beach and driving determined nature boys behind the shelter of canvas windbreaks. Small craft warnings were up from Palm Beach down through the keys.

Duggan, as he approached the Dean patio, noted Ernest and his personal St. Bernard Bert Jackson giving a studied impersonation of indolence on a couple of steamer chairs. Both stood as he walked in and both, in their trunks, were like copper-coated specimens of the "after" photographs in a physical culture magazine. Of the two, in the matter of chest mattresses, Bert had the edge on Ernest by about a fistful of hair.

Duggan said he was Chief Duggan and Ernest said yes, he knew. Then they all shook hands and sat.

"I guess Mother gave you a pretty good lineup on what happened," Ernest said.

"Yes," Duggan agreed pleasantly, "she sure did. From her somewhat limited point of view, of course."

"He means the marriage angle," Bert said. "He means her not knowing about it. Isn't that so, son?"

Ernest looked at Duggan with the glassy eyes of a fighter who has just recently been pulped. "I don't think I could make you understand."

"Try."

"You wouldn't by any chance be an only child?"

"No, there were eight of us kids," said Duggan. "Split fifty-fifty, boys and girls."

"Then you wouldn't get it."

"Get what?"

"The responsibility. Being limelighted from the moment when dad passed on. You are now the man of the family stuff. Being enveloped." Ernest felt this wasn't strong enough and added: "Being eaten, you might call it."

"Deal that again, will you?"

Ernest sank into his gloom-drenched thoughts and Bert took over.

"It's this, Chief. What you see and what the world sees of Mrs. Dean is just the outside coat. A lot of polish and a lot of glitter. Well, that stuff is for the birds. The real woman, the inside woman is and always has been strictly family. I mean as a wife to her husband and a mother to Ernest, and since her husband died of complicated pneumonia it's been just Ernest. He is as hooked up to her as a Siamese twin and you know what happens when you slice *them* apart."

Just who, Duggan wondered, did Jackson think he was kidding? The answer was simple. Duggan. The thought of Mrs. Dean in the calm, age-wise role of a Whistler's Mother or any closed-shop family situation was too much for Duggan to stomach. A vain, jealous, inordinately possessive and tyrannical woman seemed more like it. One with a death clutch on her son. A strangle hold.

"I'm still off the beam," Duggan said. "Mr. Dean, tell me this if you don't mind. Naturally you knew of your mother's thoughts on marriage. Did she expect you to stay single all your life?"

Flush deepened the bronze of Ernest's cheeks. Embarrassment? Duggan wondered. Or was it the anger of reluctant hate?

"Not all of my life, no, Mr. Duggan. Only for all of hers."

"Still, you did get married."

"When dead drunk."

"Mr. Jackson—"

"Chief?"

"Isn't preventing anything of that nature a part of your responsibility?"

"Yes. But that night, Chief, was the night my sister died."

"Bert was called to her bedside," Ernest said. "In Brooklyn. Me, I picked up Theda in a bar. Got

tangled. Got married."

"After Ernest told me she was throwing the hooks in him I met her and did what I could to get him out of it—to keep it covered up while we bargained," Bert said. "For over two months now I've been sitting on the hatch."

"What about this daybreak date, Mr. Dean? Were you reaching an agreement?"

"Yes. It's what I hoped."

"Why daybreak?" asked Duggan.

"It does sound sort of cloak-and-dagger, doesn't it? Theda wanted to have it out last night but I was tied up for dinner and for dancing. I couldn't tell her when I'd be back here."

"You and Miss Spang? And of course, Mr. Jackson?"

"Yes."

"The three of you were together continuously?"

"We were," Bert said, "until Ernest and I turned in."

"When was that?"

"Around three o'clock."

"Do you have separate bedrooms?"

"Yes."

"Mr. Dean, did you set an alarm clock for daybreak?"

"No. It would have waked up Mother. Bert woke me. He sat up and read."

"Did Mr. Dean sleep all of the time, Mr. Jackson?"

"If you mean did he get up and leave his room he didn't. I could see his door from where I was sitting."

So the watchdog had sat up and the watchdog had read. Had he, Duggan wondered, also napped? And if he had, during that straining stretch towards the break of day, were his eyes shut only to the door of Ernest's bedroom? Had he not failed to observe a possible emergence of Mrs. Dean as well?

"Mr. Dean, I should like to get this absolutely clear, please. Until you went down to the beach you

were to all purposes in somebody's company. You did go down to the beach alone, didn't you?"

"Yes. Alone."

"For ten minutes? Fifteen?"

"About fifteen minutes."

"When you came upon your wife what did you do to determine whether she was still alive? Or that help, resuscitation would be useless?"

The question dropped with its hesitant fuse and the bronze of Ernest's cheeks underwent a chalky fade.

"Theda was dead. I just knew it."

"The dead are familiar to you?"

"No. My father—otherwise only Theda. And then I saw that Puerto Rican lady and got rattled. I guess you think I'm a pretty weak sister."

"I guess we all are at some time or other," said Duggan. "Did you touch her?"

"Theda? God, no."

"Well, let's spend a few minutes on her background. Her relatives, friends, what do you know about them?"

"Nothing."

"Perhaps you do, Mr. Jackson? From your talks with her. While, as you say, you were holding down the hatch?"

Bert shrugged a handsome pair of shoulders. "She never said."

"Then how did you contact her? Where did she live?"

"I didn't. She contacted me."

"At the Deans?"

"Yes. She would fix up the time and a place and we'd meet. Mostly it was a pizza joint in the West Forties."

Duggan said to Ernest casually: "Did you know that your wife was pregnant?"

"I didn't until last night. How did you know?"

"Medical examiner's report."

"Last night when she stopped for a minute while

I was waiting for Alice. She told me then."

"She put the screws on," Bret said, and added factually as though it explained everything and nothing further need be said about it: "She was a tramp."

Back in his bachelor quarters, which were an efficiency on the edge of town, Duggan tabulated the brief reports that had come through.

Miss Sangford's bathing cap had not been found.

Miss Sangford had a record and her prints were on file.

She had been booked twice. Once for attempted extortion, once on a badger game charge.

For the past two years she had been living in her own small New York apartment in the East Fifties, ostensibly as a model but presumably, from the list of men's names and numbers in a book beside her telephone, as a call girl.

He picked up his phone and dialed Operator. "It's Duggan, honey," he said.

"Oh, hello, Bill?"

"Got a New York telephone directory handy?"

"Sure have."

"Look up a number for me, will you please, honey?"

"Sure will, Bill."

He waited. She gave him a number. He did not bother to jot it down.

"Thanks, honey. Now get me Black's, will you? As quickly as possible."

He asked the motel night clerk to connect him with the bar.

"Jimmy? Duggan here."

"Hi, Sleuth," said Hart.

"I need some dope on Sangford."

"What kind?"

"Those two bottles of Scotch last night. Did she often pull that?"

"Maybe two or three times, which is a pretty good record when you think about it. She was only here a week."

"A lush?" asked Duggan.

"No more than most. She could hold it."

"What about men? Did she play the field?"

"No. Young Dean exclusive. When any of the other fanged sharpies tried they got the broom. When are you going to pick him up, Sherlock?"

"Dean?"

"Who else?"

"You'd be amazed. Thanks, Jimmy. Be seeing you."

"Why you clam-lipped—"

Duggan hung up.

He indulged in a satisfying, jaw cracking yawn. He mused for a while on how stupid a clever criminal could get. Then he went to bed.

VII

THE AFTERNOON wore on and gusty winds up to fifty sent palm fronds streaming like a madwoman's hair. With sundown the cocktail lounge housed a jam to its last banquette, and Jimmy Hart noted few absentees from among the regulars. Mrs. Dean wasn't there, Alice Spang and her mother weren't there, and Miss Fernandez was not there.

Miss Fernandez was in the living room of her apartment and was having a very tough time of it in trying to make up her mind. What she wanted to do was to go to Mrs. Dean and warn her of the probability that danger of a most desperate character lay before her.

On this Miss Fernandez would have staked her reputation in San Juan as a woman with an uncanny gift for predicting the turn of things to come. Actually there was little of the uncanny about it and Miss Fernandez's remarkably accurate forecasts were based on her sound deductive powers and the most elementary guideposts of common sense.

Finally, with a touch of grimness, Miss Fernandez opened the front door, braved the smash of wind

around the pool's rim and fought her way to the Dean corner unit. The expression on Mrs. Dean's face when she greeted her was one of very frank annoyance.

"Miss Fernandez? I know you will understand, and will forgive me if I do not ask you in. My nerves are in no condition to entertain guests."

"I do not come here, Madame, to be entertained. My mission is pressing. I have come to instruct you in a parable."

Nothing could have been less fortunate than this opening remark. People did not "instruct" Mrs. Dean. It was an operation she reserved for her exclusive use and her temper invariably rose when, rarely, she would be confronted with such an attitude on the part of another.

But Miss Fernandez did not budge. She raised a hand with two fingers extended upright in a gesture she had once observed Cardinal Filipe Hernandos employ in the face of a recalcitrant penitent.

"It is my unshakable purpose," she said simply, "to save your life."

Against her better judgment, Mrs. Dean did feel her curiosity being aroused.

"Let's get in out of this typhoon," she said, "and then you can tell me about it."

In the living room, in the comparative quiet induced by closed jalousies, Miss Fernandez detoured towards the point.

"There was once," she said, "a fish."

Mrs. Dean clenched her fingers. "Please, let's keep it simple, will you? No fish."

"A fish," Miss Fernandez went on inexorably, "who was in residence in a coral palace at the bottom of the deep, deep sea. It was, this fish, a monster and with a monster's appetite, which it had trouble in satisfying because it was totally blind."

"Look. This is perfectly fascinating but I simply have *not* got the strength—"

"Patience, Madame! One discloses another fish,

equally monstrous but blessed with two baby eyes."

Mrs. Dean stood up. This fantastic rubbish was not only ridiculous but galling and she intended to put an end to it. Apart from herself being clearly cast as the monstrous blind horror in the tale the second fish was undoubtedly intended to represent her son. Unquestionably the woman was mad. There was that distinct look of introverted passion in her dark, accusing eyes.

"I must ask you to leave me," she said. "Go please —at once. I am not well—"

Disconcertingly, entirely unexpectedly, Miss Fernandez burst into tears which poured their crests from deep billows of shaken sobbing. It was certainly the last thing that Mrs. Dean had expected and she said rather stupidly: "I shall get you a glass of water."

She went into the service pantry and found that the pitcher of chilled water was empty. So she broke out ice cubes, with the usual time and bother that such tasks entail. It was several minutes before she returned to the living room with the water only to find Miss Fernandez gone and, like a clever magical trick, Mrs. Spang standing there in her place.

"That Puerto Rican woman let me in, dear. Then she positively swam past me in a flood of tears. Is she quite sane? At times I've wondered. And the weirdest thing—she kept muttering between sobs *'Blind, blind.'* Then something about danger and the foolish one not listening."

"She has some silly idea that my life is in danger. Of course she's crazy. She ought to be committed."

Little muscles of Mrs. Spang's face tensed, giving her expression the quality of a plaster mask.

"Your—life, dear?"

"Yes. Apparently I am a monstrous fish at the bottom of the sea, eating everything in sight, even though I'm as blind as a bat."

"Are you serious? She really said things like that?"

"Yes. She barged in and I couldn't stop her wild talk."

"But how utterly weird. You don's suppose—"

"Suppose what?" asked Mrs. Dean.

"No, no, it's too absurd. That she could have second sight, or extrasensory perception as they call it? Like those frightful tests and things going on at Duke University? Something about blindfolds and colored cards."

Mrs. Dean said with a venom so sharp that the words sank into Mrs. Spang like little knives: "If any colored cards or rabbits are going to be pulled out of the hat—I intend to pull them."

The plaster look set more rigidly until it seemed that when Mrs. Spang moved her lips her skin would crack.

"My dear, you look so intense. I simply don't follow you?"

Mrs. Dean laughed unmusically. "They say that patience is a virtue. Fools! It's the most valuable weapon that exists."

"Weapon?" Mrs. Spang inquired.

"Yes, weapon. And I intend to employ it to the hilt."

"Dear—is it possible—I mean, do you *know* something?"

"About the drowning of that despicable harlot?" She looked levelly at Mrs. Spang for a long moment, dissecting with a surgeon's touch those particles of character and avarice and tigerish rapacity which lay beneath the woman's creamed and tinted skin. She said: "What do you think?"

VIII

Mrs. Dean was a shaken woman. The world, her world, where she had lived with every assurance of dependable continuance had exploded in her face. She loved her son. Of that there could be no doubt. And all of her restrictions upon his freedom were

not, as she saw them, restrictions at all but rather a constant imposition of wise guidance.

The diseased nature of the intensity of ownership that she felt about Ernest did not occur to her ever, and she honestly believed that everything she did was for his good.

And who better than herself could shelter him with this sturdy umbrella against the dangerous storms of life? Certainly not a child like Alice, especially with her type of covetous fortune hunting mother like Mrs. Spang. No, Alice couldn't, no more than could the others have. What had been their names—Estelle? Marguerite? That rather dangerous one—Ethel?

Squashed. Buglike, beneath a diamond studded heel.

Then this.

The unbelievable treachery of a secret wife.

A dead one, now.

Murdered.

Her features hardened. There was a debt connected with murder. The guilty paid it and sometimes, rarely, the innocent. Had it been a mistake to let the affair go so far? She caught herself up. It was her false knowledge that had betrayed her, as from all she had known about it the Sangford menace had only existed during the past week.

Mrs. Dean had never felt like this before, with her mental brilliance fractured into violent shards that were nothing but meaningless strays of thoughts. Certainly she had never felt so miserable, so downright sick at heart and all straight through. Nor so sweaty chill with ice cold anger.

She noticed without much interest that it was one o'clock. It would be several hours before Ernest and Bert returned from Mario's gambling club on the county line. She had insisted upon Ernest's going, as she wanted him to follow the regular pattern of his evenings, to flaunt his unconcern in the face of a public opinion that was outrageously unjust.

Her sigh was an exclamation point, as sharp as a stiletto of Damascus steel. There would be justice, yes. But it was she who would deal it out.

Mrs. Dean seldom drank alone but she felt the need of a sustaining jolt now. A good stiff gin and tonic. In the service pantry it occurred to her as odd that only one bottle of tonic water should be in the refrigerator. She could distinctly recall that earlier in the day there had been three. Neither Ernest nor Bert ever drank tonic water, both disliking its bitterish quinine flavor. Possibly the maid? A Bahama Negress with British tastes?

She put ice cubes in a tall glass and a double shot of gin. The cap of the tonic water for once did not stick as though it had been soldered on. It came off quite easily under the first leverage of the bottle opener. She stirred the drink and carried it, untasted, back towards the living room, pausing in the dark hallway to close the beach door which the wind apparently had blown open.

She decided that the living room lounge would be the proper setting for her discovery by Ernest upon his return. She would be lying there in a frightening dead faint as a result of a severe attack of the heart, brought on by his unspeakable act of deceit. From there she would proceed to the matter of Alice Spang.

She set the gin and tonic on the coffee table before the lounge, sat down, and then picked up her handbag from where she generally tossed it on returning to the apartment, against an end pillow. She rummaged among its contents for the vial of strychnine tablets which, conspicuously placed upon the table, would bear mute testimony to the mortal shock that she had suffered.

She became aware that the vial was empty.

She sat motionless while an arctic cold embraced every fraction of her body and while her eyes, with a dreadful speculation, traveled towards and rested on the glass that contained the gin and tonic water.

The single bottle where there had been three, and the cap that had flipped off with a flick!

How terribly, terribly clever, she thought. What would better conceal the bitter taste of strychnine than the bitter flavor of quinine? They were so much akin that it would be difficult to tell them apart. Gently her hand reached out. Gently, experimentally, she sipped, allowing the liquid globules of the drink to spread upon her tongue.

Then, abruptly, she spat them out.

Was it the confusion of horrific belief that made the bitterness seem unusually acute? A conviction that the contents of the glass contained liquid death? Curiosity once had caused her to ask her doctor what a death from strychnine poisoning would be like. She recalled that the symptoms begin about ten or fifteen minutes after administration—a premonition of impending calamity, a shuddering, a sudden violent tetanic spasm, a stiff sardonic grin and—this disturbed Mrs. Dean more than anything else—the mentality of the victims during those convulsions remained usually clear.

How did it end? That moment when death blasted you smack out of life—yes, she remembered now. It crushed you into its skeleton oblivion either from exhaustion or, in the midst of a paroxysm, from asphyxia.

Mrs. Dean replaced the glass upon the table beside the empty vial.

Oddly, she felt fresh-born. Had others felt so, too? Others who had been given, as she was, this chance to keep on living through the coming generous years? Really—so close had been her brush with it—to return from the dead to life.

There was no question in her mind whatever but that the bottle of tonic water had been loaded with a lethal dose of strychnine—and then recapped. That the other two remembered bottles had been disposed of so that there would be no choice. And no one but herself was accustomed to the tonic's use, a matter

of common knowledge to any of the regulars who patronized the bar—as were the ever present tablets of strychnine to be used in the event of a sudden attack.

The empty vial? Why had it not been disposed of too? But of course. It had purposely been left to be found as a grim signpost that in her shock and heart wrenching disillusion over the beastly Sangford situation she had taken her own life.

She entered her second emotional phase, being through now with the exaltation of still being alive. Like a dark tide within her rushed the full surge of the vengeance that would be hers. She wondered what the death penalty was in Florida and felt pretty certain that it was the electric chair.

Her first thought was to preserve the drink as evidence. It was indicative of her shaken state of mind that she failed to realize that the trial would be held for the wilful drowning of Theda Sangford and not for this unsuccessful attempted homicide upon herself.

The lazy minutes of the clock had moved to one-fifteen.

She returned to the service pantry and fished the empty tonic water bottle and its cap from the garbage can. Among the utensils in a drawer she located a funnel. These things she carried back into the living room and set them on the empty coffee table. Empty?

Her electrified look pinned its surface. The drink and the strychnine vial were gone. The cold of her anger was replaced by the clammy sweat of fright. The beach door which so recently she had closed—It was not the wind that had blown it open. Not originally. Not until in an excess of stealth the intruder had failed to shut it securely after creeping inside from the outer night.

Mrs. Dean's dread reached its saturation point as she realized that her reactions to finding the strychnine vial empty had been overseen by this intruder,

and it must be obvious that the nipped poison attempt would boomerang into exposure and arrest. Frightened almost to the point of nausea she wondered whether this glorious pulse of living, which but so briefly had seemed secured, was crashing back into jeopardy.

A switch clicked, numbing Mrs. Dean within a paralyzing darkness that froze the vocal muscles with which, in her extremity, she wished to scream. A timeless moment of graveyard hush was broken only by twin breathings, one of which was her own.

The curved fingers of a strangler clamped about her throat.

IX

Miss Fernandez from her observation post at a jalousie in her own living room saw the living room Venetian blinds of the Dean apartment go dark. She noted the time by her wrist watch: one twenty-three. A feeling of foreboding had held her at this vigil during the past half hour and no one either had entered the Dean apartment or had left. Not by the front door. There was, Miss Fernandez reflected, the door that opened on the beach.

Her dour thoughts were confirmed when the Venetian blinds of Mrs. Dean's bedroom failed to indicate that lamps had been turned on in order that Mrs. Dean might retire. She looked at her wrist watch again and saw that five minutes had passed. Mrs. Dean would not prepare to retire in the dark. This, Miss Fernandez considered a purely academic deduction.

Her thoughts phrased themselves in the stilted elegance of early Latin-American drama. Something was amiss. Her rebuff earlier in the evening at the hands of Mrs. Dean had been a severe one and it was with the greatest strength of character that she forced herself to face a further ordeal. She threw a velvet stole about her shoulders as a shield against

the chill night wind and made her way around the swimming pool's rim.

There was no answer to the chime. Miss Fernandez opened the front door and stepped into the pitch darkness of the room. As she had expected, the light switch was similarly placed to her own. She pressed it, flooding the scene with amber. Mrs. Dean's body lay tossed on the carpeting near the lounge.

A tongue tip protruded. The eyes gave the unpleasant impression of dropping from their sockets. The face was a dusky blue.

Miss Fernandez touched a wrist. The flesh was warm. She felt for and found no pulse. The mirror of her compact held against the nostrils remained unclouded. They were simple tests and frequently inconclusive but they were the only ones which Miss Fernandez knew.

She was completely calm. Her nerves, from having many times faced it, were immune to a violent death. She wished to contact Chief Duggan and to have things remain exactly as they were until he got there. To accomplish this meant avoiding the furor that would follow her putting the call through the front office switchboard.

From the strong draft in the hallway she imagined the beach door would be open. It was and she left it so, and went to the telephone booth attached to Oscar Bjorgsen's beach wear shop. With the glow from her cigarette lighter she looked up the number and dialed.

"Chief Duggan?"

"Yes?"

"It is Loreta Fernandez who speaks."

"Yes, Miss Fernandez?"

"It concerns Mrs. Dean. She is choked dead."

Duggan took the news in one admirable stride. "Where are you?"

"The telephone cubicle of the lifeguard. You would wish things to be untouched. I am not un-

versed in the police aspects of crime. The motel switchboard, you understand?"

"Is she in her apartment?" asked Duggan.

"Yes."

"You did the right thing. Tell me, can you stand going back? Maybe wait out in the patio until I get there?"

"I shall permit no one to enter until you come."

"Ten minutes, then."

Oddly, she said: "There is no rush. I think we both know that."

She hung up, and Duggan had the strong impression that in her peculiarly melodramatic and witchcraft fashion she had determined the identity of the killer and the motive for the crimes. And this knowledge, he thought with a good touch of grimness, was about as safe to cart around as a Molotov cocktail, especially in view of her publicized habit of groping for things in mists.

Before leaving his quarters he put through a call to Dr. Sibley.

"Frank? This is Duggan."

"Oh, yes, Bill?"

"Another one. Mrs. Dean. Strangled."

"At Black's?"

"Yes, in her apartment."

"Want me?"

"No. I'll ship her to Tropical. But I want this and I want it bad. The Gettler test on Sangford. Can you jump the gun on that? Make it now?"

Sibley counted hours.

"Well, the solutions have been standing thirteen, fourteen hours. I guess possibly."

"Thanks, Frank."

"I'll do my best, Bill," said Dr. Sibley.

Duggan hung up, only to dial again, several times, making the regular arrangements—an ambulance from Tropical, Roth to take pictures, a technician for fingerprints, and Officer Day whom he picked up and drove with him towards Black's.

Day, of course, had the job wrapped up. "It's as plain as the nose on your face, Chief."

"Let's not get personal, Pinkerton."

"It's so plain that it falls into slots. Like pinballs. Secret wife—I am speaking now of Sangford."

"That I gathered."

"Both her, plus unwanted child, stashed for good on ice and the field all clear to gather in the Spang number in a legal marriage with the exception of one thing."

"Mama."

"Exactly right. We were pinpointed heads not to case her as next on the list."

Duggan said with a deadly seriousness: "We weren't, Alan. I was."

"I kept saying we should have nabbed him, Gettler test or no Gettler test. Didn't I?"

"You did."

"So now he gives his watchdog the slip and chokes the last hurdle to his happiness to death. How long does it take to choke, Chief?"

"Depends. Usually only a few minutes, from the effects of asphyxia, cerebral anemia and shock."

"No kidding! I had it taped as simply lack of wind."

"A lush, if he's hitting it, gets it quicker and with less bother. With mugging the victim can kick off at any time from shock while struggling, even before asphyxia is complete."

"I wouldn't line her up as a lush, would you?"

"No, I'd figure her for a good stiff fight. I want you to get the scrapings from her fingernails and get them to Sibley. He'll know what to do with them."

"You figure she raked him?"

"Probably. May have gouged the wrists, backs of the hands. Usually there's a sign." Duggan sheered somewhat abruptly: "What do you know about the lifeguard? Jorgenson? Bjorgensen?"

"Oscar?"

"Yes, Oscar."

"He is hell on skirts. Right now he's playing a blonde number from Vero Beach who's curb hopping at Hank's drive-in and—"

"—and her husband is sending him mash notes from the Ku Klux Klan."

"Gee, Chief, how did you know?"

"I get around," said Duggan, "and I'm not interested in his love life. Can you depend on him? Can he keep his trap shut?"

"About his morals, Chief, I wouldn't know."

"No matter. I'll find out for myself."

"Why?"

"Got a job I want him to do." They drew up in the motel's parking lot. "I'm going to turn the routine over to you. Stick in the apartment and when the boys come roll it."

"Where will you be, Chief?"

"I'll be around."

X

AFTER LOOKING at the body and implanting in his mind a photographic impression of the living room and other quarters of the apartment, which occupied him only a matter of minutes, Duggan left Day in charge and then joined Miss Fernandez in the patio.

The wind had tapered to a stiffish breeze and stars were developing in the sky. The entrance light was on and its glow washed yellowly over the bougainvillaea and the trimmed hibiscus hedge that separated the unit's patio from the Spangs. It touched with saffron the high complexion of Miss Frenandez's dusky cheeks and added an almost catlike glow to her somber brown eyes.

"What was it really caused you to come over here?" he asked.

"As I announced in our initial brevity, the lights. They went out. No others came on."

"This premonition of," Duggan sought the word she had used, "of amissness, was there nothing more

definite? More concrete?"

"What would one wish? The lights in a salon go out. The lights in a boudoir do not turn on. No lights turn on. No person departs. Not, that is, by the front door. One specifies a door in the rear to the beach, left open when the killer in a frenzy fled."

"Miss Fernandez, I don't want to force the point, but I want you to think back during that half hour or so when you told me you were watching. Was there nothing, no incident no matter how trifling, that you can remember?"

A slight quiver skimmed the expanses of her body as the fact struck home that Duggan deliberately and with considerable obviousness had winked. There was no doubt about it. Miss Frenandez clutched back through her memory of U. S. crime procedure as she had culled it from the paperback translations. More than once a smart detective had tipped a witness that their conversation was being overheard, usually by some mechanical device concealed behind a picture. Was this deliberate wink such a tip?

She thought it was. Her gaze traveled casually about the patio, dwelt less casually on the hibiscus hedge on the other side of which was the patio of Mrs. Spang, the desperate mother who was making her last stand.

The significance of the wink became plainer still. It not only indicated the probability of ears, but it invited cooperation as well. Surely an affirmation of the question that had been asked. Being both at heart and by national temperament a plotter of great aplomb she seized this role of undercover conspirator with a pleasurable sort of gusto.

There was a standardized pattern for the setup and she followed it.

"Ah, now that I reflect—"

A brief smile assured her that she was on the right track.

She continued: "It is—how can I express it to

you? A something delicate as a shadow—"

Duggan suggested helpfully: "In a mist?"

"A mist, yes. Very black. Right now this thing eludes, but it will come back. Perhaps the subconscious while I repose. Perhaps by dawning."

"Perhaps like yesterday morning around daybreak, when you make a practice of taking a dip and picking up shells?"

"But of course. Always it is at dawning when thoughts are best." She added darkly: "When the waters cool."

Duggan cut her short, having gained his point. At least he hoped he had—felt pretty sure of it. He couldn't come right out and say: "Set yourself up as a sitting duck." But that was what he had meant, and he believed that Miss Fernandez understood. If he had judged her correctly she would go through with it with stubborn courage.

"I'm going to the bar," he said. "I want to try and locate young Dean."

He walked away, out of the yellow light, and into the dark with its descending wind. Miss Fernandez moved close to the hibiscus hedge and said softly, experimentally: "Madame Spang?"

Something much like a whimper answered. Then the faded face of Mrs. Spang was rising like a cobwebbed moon across the hedge and saying: "I'm worried stiff. She shouldn't have gone off that way."

"One does not select the manner of one's ultimate departure."

"I don't mean Mrs. Dean. I mean Alice. Quite a while ago—several *hours* ago. She said she was running over to the cocktail lounge for a while to watch the television. I finally got so worried I went in search of her. Jimmy and Francine both said she hadn't been there at all. She's gone. *Just gone.*"

Miss Fernandez moistened her lips.

"How is it that you are aware of Mrs. Dean's death?"

"It's because I've been sitting here worrying and I

saw you come over and go in and light the light. I looked in a jalousie and it was ghastly, horrible—And now on top of it Alice."

"Madame, you have my sympathy. Do not concern yourself about that lovely child. She goes with God."

"It's all very well for you to say that. But I tell you I'm weak. Just sick and weak."

"A drink?"

"Yes. You'll come with me?"

"That is a certainty, Madame."

XI

"I'M TELLING you," Jimmy Hart said to Duggan, "that's all I know. Dean and Jackson shoved off for Mario's about nine to try and get even—and they haven't been back again. Mrs. Spang tottered in around an hour ago and buzzed Francine and me. Did we know where dear Alice was? Had we—say, get a load of who's just coming in, Bill. Old Faithful Jackson and with no sonny-boy in tow. He looks like an uncooked pancake."

Jackson rather did, with his deep tan drained by tiredness, or worry into a pasty gray. He came directly to the bar and to Duggan, and said: "I lost him."

"At Mario's?" asked Duggan.

"Yes. Is it true what that guy outside said? She's dead?"

"Yes."

"Choked?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Not long," Duggan told him.

"I ought to take three whiskies, as fast as I can put them away."

"Why?"

"It's not good. That's why."

"When did Dean skip?"

"Maybe around ten," said Jackson. "He went up to

Mario's office to get him to cash a check. Mario did and left him there finishing a drink. When he got back Ernest was gone and Mario figured he was down at the wheel."

"Ten was almost four hours ago," said Duggan.

"I know it."

"It's a long time to look."

"It's a long town, beach and county. I covered every joint we've ever been to."

"In what?"

"What do you mean in what?"

"Didn't he take his car? I should have thought he would."

"No. I figured he hightailed it with some digger or new-found buddy-buddy or took a cab. He'd been lifting them steady all day, and believe me for him it's been one tough day."

"Of course you checked back here?"

"You think I'm crazy? Would I want her to know I'd let him get slopped up and give me the slip? He's so fouled up you can't tell what he'd do."

"One thing I guess we can bank on. Sons just don't kill their mothers."

Jimmy put an interested oar in. "But," he informed them rather confusedly, "sometimes they do kill their wives."

"That tramp?" Jackson said disgustedly. "You're in a cloud, brother. Ernest wouldn't kill a fly. It's just that at times he blacks out and could maybe start swimming to China for all we'd know. You going to check with Mario, Chief?"

"Yes."

"Maybe you can get something out of him. When I kept pestering him he gave me the baby-blue-eyes runaround. 'No,' he said, 'I have no idea what could have happened to Mr. Dean. Why don't you earn your dough and go look?' Then actually he titters. The clammy jerk."

Miss Fernandez and Mrs. Spang came in and Mrs. Spang spotted Bert Jackson. The two women headed

towards them and Duggan eased away, giving Miss Fernandez the faint lowering of a left eyelid and getting a jolt to find her giving him the same.

The lights were on in Oscar Bjorgsen's quarters of the beach wear shop. Duggan knocked and being called to come in found himself facing a typical Norse giant, currently attired in a lime shantung sport shirt and dark green slacks.

"Bjorgsen?" Duggan asked.

"Yes. You're Chief Duggan?"

"Yes. I want to use the phone booth for a few minutes, then I'd like a talk."

Bjorgsen looked at an expensive wrist watch that told, to his constant bewilderment, the day, the month and the phases of the moon. It was a gift from an appreciative coal baroness from Pittsburgh.

"Glad to, Chief. She'll wait."

"Vero Beach?" asked Duggan.

"That's right. What do we talk about? Sangford? Mrs. Dean?"

"In a way."

"Boy, is this crib getting loused up with stiffs."

Duggan agreed and going to the outside phone booth shut himself in, looked up a private number in a small notebook, and dialed.

A pleasant young woman's voice said: "Mario's Club Continental, good morning?"

"Duggan speaking. Police chief, Halcyon."

"Oh, yes, Chief?"

"I'd like to talk with Mario. About young Dean. His mother's just been killed."

"Oh, no! I mean it's so terrible always, you just never can get used to it. Please wait a minute, Chief."

Duggan waited.

A well-polished voice said: "Chief Duggan? I am Mario. Did I get it straight about Mrs. Dean?"

"Yes. Strangled."

"When?"

"Maybe an hour ago. Maybe more or less."

"Then that is okay."

"About Dean?" asked Duggan.

"Yes."

"You're dead sure?"

"Nobody can be dead sure," said Mario. "If so, I would be out of business. I do know he called me up around that time and said he was keeping the car all night. He said he was calling from Palm Beach."

"What about this car?"

"I will tell you. He came to my office around ten. I cashed a check for a thousand. He asked to borrow a car for several hours. I keep some on hand for the convenience of my guests."

"Why didn't he use his own?"

"It was his wish to evade Mr. Jackson."

"Why?"

"He did not say. He told me very little. In fact he told me nothing and I did not inquire. He asked me to clam up about the car, so when Mr. Jackson blew his top I made with the old double. Mr. Dean is too valuable a customer."

"This car—a Caddy convertible, '56, I suppose?"

Mario laughed agreeably. "What else would you expect? Black, white walls, and a lemon top. No neon lights."

"Would you have the license number?"

Mario consulted a notebook containing the club's less vital statistics and gave Duggan a number.

"There was also this," he said. "No matter what he was up to I figured the kid needed a break. That mother of his was keeping him in Alcatraz and speaking impersonally I am glad that she is cooked."

Duggan thanked Mario and hung up. He put through several calls arranging for a state-wide general on the car for all detective cruisers and radio patrols, and the several radio night disc jockeys, requesting that Ernest Dean be in turn requested to contact Chief Duggan at Black's. The nature of the request: *Urgent.*

He dialed Tropical. He asked to be connected with

Dr. Sibley.

Sibley said shortly: "Bill?"

"Yes, Frank. Any luck?"

"Plenty. Mr. Gettler's test is all done and successfully, too. You were absolutely right. And to that fact, under oath, will I so testify in court. In my pearl gray suit. What makes you so smart?"

"I just happened to know floaters, that's all. I was a lifeguard for a while."

"Even so. That might account for your build but not for your brains."

"You've got the boys all wrong," said Duggan. "Catch one with clothes on and he'll slap a Phi Beta Kappa key in your face."

"Incidentally, where is our Mrs. Dean?"

"Probably on the way."

"So far I've received nothing but an envelope containing fingernail scrapings—courtesty of Officer Day."

"Got anything on them yet?"

"Yes, mircroscopically, not chemically. No flesh. No blood. Just some rubber."

"Rubber?"

"That's right, Bill. Red rubber. Like from rubber gloves such—I suggest to your eagle-hawk mind—as women use when they dye their hair."

"What's an eagle-hawk?"

"Do we care?" said Sibley.

"No."

"Did Mrs. Dean dye her hair?"

"Sure she did, but with her dough she didn't do it in rubber gloves. It was done in a box seat at some Emile's or Antoine's." *But,* Duggan thought reflectively, *the down-to-her-last-nickel Mrs. Spang would do her own hair dyeing.*

"I told you you were a bright boy," Sibley said. "When do you ring up the curtain on the final act?"

"Maybe around daybreak. Maybe."

"Well, good hunting to you."

"Thanks, Frank. I'll save the fox's tail for your

handlebars."

"Do that. Be seeing you."

Duggan hung up. Good-bye, he thought, to scratches on the strangler's hands and wrists. Rubber gloves came well up on the forearm. He stood for a short moment watching the pale line of combers crash and cream hissing up the sand. They had movement in the circumscribed arena of this private world where nothing else moved at all. Only the wind, which you could hear and feel but couldn't see at all.

In his mind's eye he projected a picture of daybreak, of a lone figure in her swim suit of flamingo, bravely defenseless in all this emptiness, with eyes cast sandward in a search for shells. And then the invitation for a mutual swim.

He returned to Bjorgsen's quarters.

He said: "Look, Bjorgsen. Here's what I'd like for us to do."

He outlined his plan, and thus set in motion one of the most unpredictable boners of his official existence.

The motel slept and the minutes flagged on with their pacing. The units were dark in this sleep with the exception of the living room jalousies of the Deans.

Duggan went in and was pleased to note that the body had been taken away. He gave a moment of audience appreciation to the duet of gurgles and snores that were being broadcast from Station Day, who slouched almost flat in a lounge chair, and from the room where Bert Jackson lay entirely flat on his bed.

Careful not to alarm the watchdogs by barking and waking them up, Duggan quietly cased the room more in detail than he had before. This careful search disclosed an all but unnoticeable tip of metal projecting under the front fringe of the lounge. It was a funnel, and with respectful regard for fingerprints he placed it on the coffee table.

The thing was incongruous, and especially its location from having rolled or been kicked beneath the lounge, and the incongruous always excited him. What was a funnel used for? To pour something into something through the neck of a bottle. Duggan, he congratulated himself, you are quick as a whippet. The funnel's size seemed about right for a beer bottle or one for soft drinks.

He pursued the puzzle into the service pantry. Apparently no answer there. He rooted around and found a plastic vegetable bag, got the funnel, bagged it, and stashed it behind china on the shelf of a wall cabinet. He went on with his casing against continued mood music of snores.

XII

THE HOURS ROLLED, and the wind sank from stiff to breeze, and the anger went largely out of the ocean and its movement, with the exception of an occasional mutinous kickup, grew smooth like a strong sleeper's chest.

The night still held, but the feel of dawn was in the air, and Miss Fernandez prepared. She deliberately advertised her awakening by turning on both bedroom and living room lights. Then she knelt and said her morning prayers. They included a request that God, through the offices of Chief Duggan, would so arrange her prospects that she might view again her beloved San Juan, her beloved fishing villages on the south coast and little mountain hamlets in the heart of Puerto Rico's coffee country, and her favorite "out on the island" spots of Ponce, Parguera, Mayaguez and Coamo.

Having finished up this comprehensive Cook's Tour she exchanged her nightdress for the flamingo swim suit. From the cutlery drawer in the service pantry she selected a small paring knife and satisfied herself as to its point and cutting edge. She was, with knives, in the nature of a connoisseur. She

dropped it into the bag she carried for shells.

Darkness succeeded to the thin spread of predawn and as the moment approached, became zero hour near, she experienced a tension of the little nerves. This was in no manner connected with any heart restrictive qualities of fear—such as had held the screams unborn in the throat of Mrs. Dean—for she was content that Duggan would never have advanced his semi-subtle suggestion—to speak of it kindly—without having proper guards for her safety in mind.

The tension was rather that of a prima donna waiting the cue to bring her on stage, and a band of pale raspberry in the eastern sky warned her that the cue had come. She turned out lights, then stepped into the pastel hush of the patio and it seemed that she alone in the world were awake, but she knew this was not so.

Unless Duggan's calculations and her own were at serious fault the killer, at this moment, masked behind some flora of nature or the structural jobs of man, would already be giving her the lethal eye.

She walked leisurely past the black pearl surface of the swimming pool and towards the vaulted passageway leading to the beach. Its tiled flooring was glassy cool, and then the sand was beneath her feet and carpeted before her to the creamy sheet of foam as each comber spent its journey on the shale. She eyed the surf professionally, being an excellent swimmer, and thought it moderate, being neither dabble flat nor undertow strong.

Miss Fernandez crossed the dry section pitted with the footsteps of yesterday, and as yet unraked for the morning, and came to the table-top firmness of the moist packed shelf, clean washed by the tide on ebb.

She assumed the familiar pose, the slight stoop and the downcast look of the seeker after shells. But her eyes were blind and such few as she gathered were worthless specimens picked up for effect at

random. She had reached the northern limit of Black's private beach when she sensed—certainly it was impossible to hear footfalls on the sand—the presence of someone behind her.

"Good morning," the voice said pleasantly.

She permitted the bag of shells to drop and then fumbled for it clumsily, but before she could retrieve it it was picked up.

"So sorry, Miss Fernandez. I hope I didn't startle you. Although obviously I must have."

She smiled noncommittally. "One is so accustomed to isolation at this hour."

"After that ghastly business of last night I thought an early dip might be bracing."

She shopped for a platitude. "Sleep is difficult during moments of drama."

"Impossible, I found it. Although we often think we've stayed awake through the night when actually we've napped."

She wondered for how long this prattle would slide on with the balance of a tightrope walker, before the hands would initiate their blunt purpose which was to kill her—to silence her for good.

At the moment the hands were fumbling with the bag of shells, pressing the contents exploratively through the denim cloth and pausing—she could tell the precise instant—when they identified the shape of the paring knife. Then the bag was tossed carelessly down on the sand.

"Let's take a plunge, Miss Fernandez. Shall we?"

"If you wish."

Strongly fatalistic by nature Miss Fernandez glanced fractionally at the shell bag, humped now so uselessly with its improvised stiletto on the beach.

Companionably they walked, two people alone on this plateau of emptiness which embraced the sands and the surface of the sea and the sky above. A broken wave hissed swift along the shelf. It curled with spent force past their ankles, warm and clean and sharp in this remainder of its former power.

They dove through a roller that crested in, emerged into the long smooth troughs and moderate hills, and swam out to the flatter heave.

They stopped for a breather, treading water, and Miss Fernandez kept with the careless motion of her arms a wary space between.

"You swim well, Mr. Jackson," she said.

"Almost as well as you do." Bert's eyes turned beachward and found it devoid of life. But you never knew. He gauged the dawn. Pretty bright by now. And soon the sun. "I think we've come out far enough," he said. "Don't you?"

Several yards from where the feet of Bert and Miss Fernandez were treading water, and at a slightly lower level, Duggan and Bjorgsen observed the lazy paddlings from their submerged retreat. They were equipped with aqualungs, weighted belts, flippers and masks from the skin diving stock of the beach wear shop.

The light was strong enough for good vision, sifting down through the ocean ceiling of opalescent amber grays. As Bert's legs drifted with imperceptible purpose gently closer to the legs of Miss Fernandez both men with fishlike ease came closer, too.

Duggan was an immeasurably relieved man. The situation was well in hand. Two witnesses, himself and Bjorgsen, would apprehend the killer in his third and last attack upon a human life. His admiration for Miss Fernandez knew no bounds.

Gently between the two sets of dangling legs, gently the gap decreased.

Now the legs of Bert were quite still and the whipcord muscles tensed along the thighs until with the power crash of a barracuda Bert dove and grasping Miss Fernandez by her ankles yanked her below.

Not unlike a barracuda himself, Duggan struck.

In addition to his muscular strength he had the tremendous advantage of shock surprise. Bert had no conceivable way of knowing what it was that had

hit him and his first thought was that the arm which lashed around his throat, mugging him, was the tentacle of an octopus. He instantly gave up his intentions regarding Miss Fernandez and panicked into a violent effort to shed the stranglehold of this monster of the deep.

While this was going on Bjorgsen had gripped and surfaced with Miss Fernandez where he threw back his mask and asked solicitously: "Are you okay?"

Miss Fernandez discarded a final mouthful of salt water. Although still a little confused over incredible rescue by this goggled creature—now identified—she felt as strong as an ox and quite generally fine.

"A little damp inside, Mr. Bjorgsen. But okay. But Mr. Duggan—he is, one gathers, below? Should we not create a diversion? Assist?"

"Why?" Oscar asked reasonably. "Unless they surface by the next ten seconds that Jackson crumb will be a windless cadaver. Duggan's got a 'lung. One thing—"

"Yes?"

"Jackson. His being the killer. To me it don't make sense."

"You will find, Mr. Bjorgsen, that when the evidence and motive for these tragedies are diclosed —the greed, the lust, the knives of fear, the repressions of a caste-hungry soul—it is the only solution that does."

Duggan's masked head broke water first. Then Bert's sullen good looks emerged, too—only to have his jaw get a knockout crash from Duggan's fist.

Duggan unmasked. "You two all right?" he asked.

"Tops, Chief," Oscar said.

"Stick together. I'll tow this squid ashore."

They offered an uneventful flotilla-in-quartet on their passage towards the beach. Uneventful, that is, until they reached the line of surf when towering in its comparative magnitude up behind them a seventh wave barreled in at express speed.

Duggan's reaction to this ever unpredictable

phenomenon of the sea was to find himself upended and his face slammed with piston force down into the ocean floor while his tow, the flaccid Bert, became galvanized into a dynamo and with a forceful kick in the small of Duggan's back broke loose. The inescapable confusion of the moment held the tumbling uncertainties of earthquake.

Being unencumbered with aqualungs, weighted belts and flippers or—as in the case of Miss Fernandez—with the laudable efforts at assistance on the part of Bjorgsen, Bert easily struggled ashore before any of the others got a nose or an eye out of water. He wasted no time, but sprinted for the vaulted beach archway, vanishing into its cavern while the rest were still recovering their strength and their wits.

Having finally disentangled herself from Oscar, Miss Fernandez battled the resurgent undertow's pull and waded in. Duggan and Bjorgsen followed.

"Where is he?" Oscar asked.

The three looked, with heavy breathing, at Bert's last known place of residence—the surf.

"Better see what we can do," Duggan said, starting to shed his paraphernalia.

Bjorgsen followed suit and they were on the point of taking a running plunge when Miss Fernandez called their attention to the footprints in the sand.

"That," she said, indicating the deep, sharp impacts in the smooth-washed shale, "is the direction in which he went."

XIII

Dawn by now was in full force, and Bert had what he felt to be the most incredible stroke of good luck. He had pounded at lung-bursting speed through the arched vault and on towards the parking lot of the motel. He had no thought beyond instant flight and an urge to put as much distance as he could between himself and the law until he could devise some

scheme for a more permanent escape.

It was his intention to use the Jaguar, Ernest's car, which Bert had parked on his after-midnight return, and a spare ignition key which was always cached with a magnetized gadget under a fender. He had about reached it when a red Pontiac convertible flashed into the parking lot and headed for an open space alongside the Jaguar. To his confused amazement Bert saw that Alice Spang was driving it and that Ernest, apparently out cold, was slumped beside her.

Inspirationally, Bert leaped. He pulled open the Pontiac's door, shoved Alice along the seat and said: "We've got to get Ernest out of here fast or he's a cooked goose. I've been looking for the kid all night."

"In," Alice asked, with the pent-up irritability of a hideous night, "a pair of wet swim trunks?"

"Don't get smart," Bert snarled and shot the Pontiac into reverse. Then he headed for the entrance and gave her the gun with a lurch that almost caused him to sideswipe the Lincoln coupe of the Cardigan bags who were foggily rolling home after having put the Club Sans Souci to bed.

A word about the Cardigan bags. They were twin sisters of mutually uncertain age from Akron, Ohio, where their parents had died and left them in the unappetizing role of spinsterhood but also heiresses to some tons of well invested pelf derived from the manufacture of tires. Both being alcoholics, in a nice genteel way, they lived in a steamy haze of liquid fun, retaining just enough coordination to permit them to drive their car from oasis to oasis without committing suicide.

It explains why, when they talked with Duggan a few minutes after their brush with the Pontiac, their account of the incident had the dubious cohesion and vague edges of a tired blanc mange.

It was, they told him in counterpoint, a miracle that they had escaped with their lives. Bert Jackson who was driving, and whom they recognized, had

shot towards them like a madman and with him, looking frightened, was Alice Spang and on her other side, looking dead, was Ernest Dean.

"Was this car," Duggan asked a twin, "a black convertible Cadillac with a lemon top?"

"We didn't notice," the twin said.

"We didn't care," the other twin said.

"We had no time for lemon tops."

"And anyhow, whatever it was it was down."

"The top?" Duggan asked.

"It must have been, because the three of them were all sticking out in the open."

"Like three leaves. That's the way they went by us. Like three flutted leaves in a great big terrible gale."

This was good enough for Duggan, even the "flutted," whatever that stood for in the dictionary of dipsos. It was a wonder what with the alcoholic scud through which at the moment they were enjoying life that they had been able to differentiate between a convertible and an armored tank. It puzzled him briefly that the general alarm had not been effective and the Caddy picked up, but he put it down to the darkness and that the emphasis of search had lain around Palm Beach and, presumably, to the north. Now that daylight was on hand he felt satisfied that some cruiser would spot and stop the car.

But would Bert stop?

Duggan grew cold at the realization that of course Bert wouldn't. He felt reasonably certain that Bert wasn't armed, hadn't paused to gather up some weapon, but the car itself was a weapon with the deadly power of a fatal crash during a chase.

He hurried to the nearest telephone, which was in the manager's quarters, and worked himself into a sweat amending the general alarm to the effect that the people in the black Cadillac convertible with the lemon top now numbered three, that the man at the wheel was a killer in the process both of escaping and in abducting the other two occupants.

There was almost no traffic and Bert made good time, crossing the intracoastal waterways bridge at Dania, then charting his course towards a cypress swamp in Collier County as hard as he could shove it. He knew of a hunting shack in one of the savannahs, having once visited it with Ernest and one of Ernest's native bar buddies. It was a dream spot for any angle you could think of. Plenty of sink holes to swallow things up.

There was dough in Ernest, dead or alive. Contact the family lawyer—Bert had met him several times at the Deans—and arrange a foolproof drop for the ransom. Then Mexico, Brazil, Timbucktu—who cares. And the girl—she could be used to keep Dean in line. Make a corkscrew out of her arms and Dean would be begging him to accept the dough. A laugh.

Swamp country. Muck, and the fungus-like rotting smell of water. They said that the turkey buzzards pecked your eyes out first.

His stomach contracted into knots as he spotted a highway patrol car up ahead, drawn up lazy on the shoulder at an intersection. He glanced at Alice, pale and stringy and frightened and his voice had the threat of a gun at her head.

"Quit figuring, sister. One move, one yelp out of you as we pass them, and you'll be deader than most. Just sit still and play it cool."

He slowed circumspectly and sweated with relief when the patrol car's two uniformed occupants gave the Pontiac little more than a cursory glance. He figured time. The Cardigan bags had spotted his takeoff and even though they were constantly potted he could tell that they had recognized him. It was a cinch that Duggan would shoot out a general alarm.

Bert looked at the car's radio. It had no band for police calls but the regular channels surely would be carrying an account of the choke job by now—maybe even on-the-spot-stuff from the motel. The Dean name was newsworthy enough for it.

He tuned in and caught the close of a Miami news-

cast: "—barely missing a Lincoln coupe driven by Miss Evelyn Cardigan who was returning from a night club with her twin sister, Miss Lily Cardigan. The sisters are from Akron, Ohio, and are the heiresses to Fleetwood Tire. Although slightly suffering from shock they granted an interview and here is a tape recording of their description of the getaway car:

Did you get a good look at the occupants, Miss Cardigan?

Perfect. Positively perfect.

After all, they were almost dumped into our laps.

No, Lily, we were almost dumped into theirs.

Did you identify the make of the car?

Absolutely. We gave a detailed description of it to Chief Duggan.

What make was it, Miss Cardigan?

A Cadillac convertible. Black with white walled tires. And a lemon top.

Did you get the license number, Miss Cardigan?

We didn't. We felt too faint.

The Misses Cardigan succumbed to shock again at this point and the interview closed. We will bring you constant bulletins throughout the day as they come in and now, after a brief pause, the weather."

Bert clicked off the switch. "Brother, what a break! Those two dipsos are steamed up to the gills."

"They always are," Alice said.

"Black Caddy! Lemon top! It's a wonder they didn't dream up six lizards in green pants."

He was filled with a terrific exultation and an almost drunken feeling of absolute security. He was getting the breaks and all he had to do was to roll them to keep them coming his way. He felt good. Caesar good, all through. He wished he had a cigar.

"Bert—"

In his excess of warm comfortableness he said almost pleasantly: "Well?"

"The child— All the rest I could maybe understand—"

He snapped into ice.

"Cut the string section, sister. What about the kid? It was mine, wasn't it?"

A rush of wonder swept her, cool, and with the feel of mountain streams.

"Yours—and Miss Sangford's?"

"Miss Sangford in the pig's rear bumper. That tramp was Mrs. Bert Jackson before she took a nose dive into bigamy by becoming Mrs. Dean. Him—" Bert cast a contemptuous look at Ernest. "That night when we fixed it for her to hook him, Theda told me afterwards that he wasn't even able to kick off his shoes."

"Then there was no marriage, legally."

Bert blazed impatiently: "Why do you think I killed her? That nitwit brain of hers had it all figured down to a dime. First she figured I was holding out on the take, which I was. Then she figured on selling out. Big Payoff stuff, with me in the ashcan."

"She'd admit to bigamy?"

"She could play it a number of ways—all to her very rosy. And there was nothing I could do. So I did it." He looked at her with flat, killer eyes. "So be a good girl, Alice, or I'll belt you out into left field."

XIV

THE SUN RODE higher and County Attorney Oswald Pinker finished packing his bag for a short week-end jaunt to Nassau as a guest of the Tommy Andersons aboard their diesel yacht *Carp II*.

Pinker was a magnetic, energetically agreeable man in his thirties with a first-rate legal mind and a courtroom manner that could have given Miss Fernandez's repertoire of histrionics a point or two to think about. He was well regarded both by the yacht club set and by his party's political machine as a smooth, brilliant cookie who was destined to go far.

His home near the county seat, which he occupied

with his wife Celeste and their three children, was a handsome ranch style structure and could easily be expanded into a summer manse appropriate for a governorship.

The telephone rang and Pinker found Dr. Lawrence Ford, the county medical examiner, on the line.

"Thought you might want to know, Oz," Ford said. "Those two homicides in Halcyon are turning into pretty hot stuff."

"Homicides? Two? I thought it was a simple drowning."

"That's what it looked like at first, but Sibley says it's definitely murder. With a repeat last night, presumably by the same Joe, of a strangling."

"Look—take it easy, Larry. I just got up. Been packing for Nassau with the Andersons."

"Better unpack, Oz. This has busted out into main line stuff—socialites, money, abduction—nationwide coverage. Sibley's given me a rundown for as far as he knows."

Ford relayed as much of the situation as he had gathered from Sibley. Reluctantly, Pinker cancelled the Nassau cruise and headed his car for Halcyon-by-the-Sea.

He found the motel, already filled to mid-season capacity, further overrun with the press, the wire services, radio and TV. He diplomatically ran this gauntlet and finally was closeted alone with Duggan in the unit that had been occupied by Theda Sangford, and in which Duggan had set up shop. Every other rental was splitting its seams.

They shook hands. Pinker wiped his brow. "Let's get on. Right now the job reads like a page from *'Through a Looking Glass'*—a floater that isn't a matricide that isn't an arrest that isn't, some rigmarole about a Gettler test busting the case wide open. Just what *is* a Gettler test?"

"Basically it's used to prove drowning."

"But we knew that. That the Sangford woman was

drowned."

"Sure, but we didn't know how. Or where."

"Where? Sort of silly, isn't it? To section off the Atlantic Ocean—X marks the wave?"

Duggan smiled back. "That isn't the angle. The real value of the Gettler test is that it can show whether the drowning took place in fresh water or in salt."

Pinker was immediately interested. Here was something he could use, really sink his teeth into and dramatically present before a jury, like the cornucopia trick with the colored silks.

"Tell me," he said, "exactly how."

"Well, let's take the heart. There's two of them, two sides, really. The left and the right. When a guy drowns he inhales water and this water is absorbed into the blood of the pulmonary veins and finally reaches the *left* heart."

"I get the emphasis."

"Now, if the drowning takes place in fresh water the left heart blood contains less sodium chloride than the right."

"Sodium chloride, if I remember my primer, being plain, common salt."

"Just about, but try and catch an M.D. admitting it. Then on the other hand, if the drowning took place in sea water the left heart would contain a much higher saline content than the right. That's what the Gettler test is based on. The discovery that in most cases of drowning the sodium chloride content of the blood of the left and right chambers of the heart is different."

"I see where you're heading. But look here, take that swimming pool out there. That's fresh water, certainly as far as a jury's notion is concerned, and yet it's purified by chlorination. The defense is bound to latch onto that angle and make a field day of it. Doesn't it throw the test out of the window?"

"No. By state specification the chlorine content of swimming pools must be kept down within minus

point four and minus point six percent. Sibley adjusted for that in his analysis. Sangford was drowned in fresh water, but not in a fresh water chlorinated pool. She was drowned in that bathtub right inside there."

"Apart from the Gettler test, got any evidence?"

"Plenty. The minute I saw the body I knew the setup was wrong. You see, I've been a lifeguard. I'm familiar with floaters. There was the way her body lay, and the pattern of sand that had dried on her skin."

"Sand patterns—interesting. I'll use it. What was unique about them?"

Duggan, from papers on the desk, selected two photographs that Roth had taken. He handed them to Pinker.

"Take a look." Pinker studied the shots intently. "I'd say she'd first been dumped down flat, then arranged on her side. If she'd been washed ashore she'd have been more bundled, and the tide would have cleaned off the sand."

"That's exactly what's unique about the patterns. There shouldn't be any. Then her hair. There was no bathing cap."

"But don't they thrash around? Couldn't she have yanked it off herself while drowning? I'm simply exploring the defense again, Duggan. We know she never wore one. Not in a tub. What about the hair?"

"Some of it had streaked over her face and I brushed it back. Near the scalp it was not only damp but soft damp, fresh water damp, not sticky."

"That's a pretty fine distinction, isn't it?"

"Very. Not a guy in a hundred would notice it, and it will get you nowhere as evidence. But the hair oil will."

"Yes, it's good—salt water would wash the oil off with any sort of submersion, but not a short ducking under fresh."

"Then there are the bruise marks on her ankles, when he yanked her up to pull her head under."

"Do you know something? It's like that famous old case in England when bathtubs were still a novelty. Was it England or here?"

"I remember the one you mean. The guy married a bunch of wives, caught their heels while they took a bath, yanked up and their heads went under. And right away he was once more a rich windower. Simple as pie. Only Jackson elaborated. He dumped the body by the sea shortly before proposed Suspect Number One—young Dean—was due to trot down to the beach for a daybreak rendezvous."

"Slow up a bit. I'm puzzled about how come Miss Sangford would lie quietly, and I might add fully exposed, in a tub of water and let Jackson wander in without her yelping?"

"No trouble there. They were married. About a year before she bought herself a bigamy charge by marrying Dean. I got that from New York when they put Sangford's record through the mill."

"Then that's where the motive lies—bigamy. That kid she was going to have figures too, wouldn't you say?"

"Sure to be along those lines. I think she was dealing him out. We'll dig it out of him. Incidentally, she took a bath about four in the morning. Perhaps because she was expecting Jackson. We know she was expecting him."

"How?"

"She had Jimmy, the bartender, drop off a couple of bottles of Scotch after the bar closed. Jackson's fingerprints are on one of them."

Pinker was enchanted. "That nails it. That nails him smack on the scene of the crime. Wonder why he was careless? Didn't wipe off things in here he'd touched?"

"He was conceited enough to be positive this never would be considered the scene of the crime. He'd have made book that the ocean would be officially accepted as the spot."

Pinker mulled for a moment such evidence as

there was at hand, digesting it, dovetailing it with the more general picture he had been given by Hart.

"Tell me," he said, "what put you on to him? Almost everything pointed towards Dean, or his mother—or even the Spangs."

"His lies, and the fact that he held the key position in the whole setup."

"Amazing, isn't it, how even the smartest of them will lie and expect to get away with it?"

"They get cocky, and then Jackson knew we had no reason to suspect him. When I first questioned him about the Sangford deal, that is."

"What did he lie about?"

"Telling about the couple of months while he acted as payoff man for Dean to keep the marriage under the hatch. Claimed he knew nothing about her. He said she always contacted him by phone at the Deans and arranged a time and meeting place. Well, first it seemed funny to me he hadn't tailed her, then when her record came through from New York listing her as a probable call girl, from a small book of men's numbers by the phone in her apartment—"

"Of course. You checked the telephone directory."

"Our local operator had one for Manhattan and she looked it up. Theda Sangford was listed all right and that, in my book, laid Jackson wide open. The rest was simple arithmetic."

"What a complete louse. Think of it, Duggan. His own wife for bait. About the strangling—I suppose Mrs. Dean got on to something, or else Jackson thought she had."

"He knew she was waiting. Her patience was out of character." Duggan became succinct. He was increasingly worried as to why the general alarm didn't show results.

He said tersely: "Jackson knew that a woman like her would have blasted him the minute she found out he'd two-timed her about the secret marriage. Unless she was getting wise to a hotter revenge—like his being the killer. Actually, Mrs. Spang was

told by Mrs. Dean that Mrs. Dean 'knew something.' The word spread and naturally Jackson got it. To him, it fitted. Same setup with Fernandez."

"You planted that, of course."

"Sure, just as Day's pretending to fall asleep was a plant to make Jackson feel he had a clear field. Those things will be answered when we nab him—along with odds and ends like a funnel, rubber gloves, how he missed finding the Dean marriage certificate, et cetera. Right now I'm worried—bad."

"About Dean and Miss Spang? So am I. I suppose the only answer why they haven't been spotted is that they've holed in."

"No, I've been thinking. There's another answer!"

Duggan put through a call for the Club Continental, and a harsh male voice barked: "Yes?"

"I'm Duggan. Police chief, Halcyon. I want to speak with Mario."

"You can't. He's asleep. He never gets up before three in the afternoon."

"Wake him."

"Are you kidding?"

"You heard me."

"It's a tough job, Chief."

"Do it."

"Well, if you say so."

Shortly Mario's rich voice said frowsily: "It is I, Mario. Why do you do this bad thing to me, Duggan?"

"Why did you lie to me?"

Mario's voice was complacent. "Ah—my little fib."

"Your little fib may result in killing Dean and Miss Spang."

"Do not joke with me while I am sleeping."

"Get this, Mario. Dean and Alice Spang have been kidnapped by Jackson."

"That is so terrible? A watchdog gathers up his sheep? For that I am woke up at—" Mario's voice plunged into horror, "—*mama mia,* it is but eleven o'clock!"

"For God's sake snap out of it. Jackson's no watchdog. He's a killer. He's *the* killer. Does that sink in?"

Mario's voice sharped to complete seriousness. "Yes, and at once I will tell you. If anything should happen to those two nice, rich kids because of me I would kill myself."

"That, I doubt."

"No matter. It is a noble thought. When Mr. Dean comes to my office at ten o'clock last night he cashes this check for one thousand dollars. But it is not for the cages or the wheel. He has arranged a plan during the daytime in secret with Miss Spang. They are to elope. They are to drive to Georgia where you can get married simply by opening your mouth—Duggan, why are they not now in Georgia?"

"I don't know. Get back on line."

"It is true as I told you last night that I loaned him a car, but it was not one of the Cadillacs."

"Why did you say it was?"

"I didn't. You did. It was a thing you took for granted. Me, I simply played along. Remember?"

Duggan remembered. "But why?" he asked.

"So that Mr. Dean would not be disturbed on his honeymoon. It would have been indelicate to let him be hauled back by cops for the foolish reason that his mother got herself justifiably killed. I am a sentimental man."

"Mr. Shylock was, too. What car did Dean take?"

"I told Slick to give him any car he wanted, and he took Slick's."

"What make?"

"It is a Pontiac convertible. Very red, which is why it possibly appealed to Mr. Dean for the happy occasion. Most festive."

"Don't crowd it. What year? License number?"

"You will relax while I find out such things from Slick. He is by my side. It is he who risked his life to wake me up. He is certain to know."

After a muttered off the line conversation Mario's voice returned and gave Duggan the data he wanted.

Duggan thanked him, jotted the license number on a pad, and hung up.

"Wrong car?" Pinker asked.

"Wrong car."

"You'll change the alarm at once, of course."

"In part."

"Part? I take it, Duggan, that our one-man-crime-wave Jackson is heading for a shock."

XV

THE CANAL alongside the road was choked with suede green leaves and the purple of water hyacinth, while high in the shimmery heat over sage palmetto fans and the turpentine trees a buzzard lazed.

For mile after safe swift mile Bert, like spring, had been busting out all over with an almost drunken, arrogant sense of content. Boy, he told himself happily, you've got a rainbow 'round your shoulder. Along this sparsely traveled stretch which led to the cutoff through the savannah to the shack nothing could happen and the dangerous part of the job would be done. The initial flight.

Even along the more populated highways the luck had held. One road patrol car, one cruiser from the sheriff's office. A steady forty-per in passing them and all had been smooth. One thought had bothered: his being in swim trunks. But he was also, he remembered, in Florida where plenty of joes you saw in cars looked stripped.

And here along this desolate route he was satisfied, from frequent glancings in the rearview mirror, that he had no tail. Only that buzzard hanging in the sky. Only that yellow helicopter traipsing away like an old maid in long skirts far up above in the hot cloudless blue. From, Bert casually thought, one of the fields in the general area.

A sputter brought his eyes sharply to the panel. The gas indicator stood at Empty. A towering rage swept him at his own lulled stupidity.

"When did you fill this crate last?" he snapped at Alice.

"We were going to, but we stopped at a roadhouse and Ernest—well, when we came out Ernest couldn't drive."

"I've been wondering why you turned back."

"I couldn't face it. Landing at that hour of the night someplace and—"

"Skip the blueprints." Bert threw a disgusted look at the wreck on her other side. "How a neat package like you could ever tie up with a ribbon-winner stewpot like him— It gets me."

"I love him. I love him very much.

Bert reserved his blistering reaction to this starched lace valentine as his rage vanished before visual proof that his luck was still hot. A piece ahead, just coming into eye reach, like a blessing stood what resembled a weather-tired, small general store. Two gas pumps were before its porch.

Bert coasted onto the shoulder. He sank into swift reflection. The distant store looked lifeless and the car, he felt, would still have been unobserved.

"Stay put," he said to Alice.

He got out and opened the luggage compartment. Among its small litter of contents a length of towline and a wipe rag pleased him.

He said to Alice: "Get out."

"What are you going to do?"

He leaned loosely on the open door.

He said: "Do you play it my way, or do you get a tire iron shacked up in your head?"

Alice got out. Using the towline and the wipe rag he wrapped her up. He lifted her into the luggage compartment and slammed the lid. He fished the wallet from Ernest's hip pocket and was enchanted to find that it held, at a rough estimate, over eight or nine hundred bucks. Carrying it in his hand he walked towards the store.

It was farther away than it had seemed and his

bare feet burned every step when they flattened on the blacktop. This, however, was a minor pest. The overall picture continued sound. He got to the store and hoped that somebody inside its dying shell would still be alive. He went into a twilight clutter.

"Anybody here?" he called.

A door opened in the room's rear and a bovine young woman, bulging in a play suit, came out of the shadows and inspected him.

"Been swimming, mister?"

"Many times, sugar ball, and let's cut the Abbott-and-Costello, shall we? I'm out of gas. Got a gallon can? I'll fill up when I bring it back."

"I'll go look and see. I think Job left one in the utility maybe a week or so ago. It's probably empty."

Minutes treacled through Bert's impatience in the fly-buzzing shade, and mosquitoes abroad from the surrounding swampland pulled their sneak attacks. Finally, after a good, endless quarter of an hour, the young woman returned.

"I got a can."

He said irritably: "That's peachy, ma'am. Just peachy. Let's fill it."

The can was filled. He gave her a five-dollar-bill.

"Hold it," he said, "until I come back."

He set off towards the car, and looked ahead and his stomach was gripped by inside hands almost twisting his guts out as he saw that a patrol car was parked by the Pontiac. His luck blew up in his head. He dropped the can of gas and tensed for an offside sprint into the palmettos.

"Don't try it, Jackson," a voice behind him said.

The sheriff's deputy was not only a big young man but his right hand held what looked to Bert like a cannon.

"Just keep moving along the road," the deputy said.

Bert moved. He clutched after shredded lifebelts.

"You've got no call to jump me like this."

The deputy's voice was hard and exact. "You are

under arrest for abduction and murder."

"You've got the wrong car. I heard the alarm. Black Caddy with a lemon top. Does that bus of mine—"

"Save it. You got the call Duggan had them keep sending on the regular broadcast channels. The general he put through on the police bands called for a red Pontiac convertible which is just what you've got. That firecracker blazed a trail two yards wide and we were just laying off until you stopped."

"I kept looking—"

"Sure you did. So did that helicopter up there. Two-ways radio communication, Jackson. Field glasses. They even spotted your storage job in the trunk."

XVI

THE MIDDAY siesta-hour sun blazed hot down on Black's and Miss Fernandez applied another pat of eau de cologne to Mrs. Spang's fevered brow. If only, if *only*, Mrs. Spang begged in silent prayer, they come back alive. Then everything, the whole great big beautiful world, would be peaches and cream.

She already had the major outlines for the wedding planned. St. Thomas's, of course, with a reception in the Waldorf-Astoria. Naturally there must be a wait, a decent interval between Mrs. Dean's shocking death and the divine event but the time would not be wasted. During it, Mrs. Spang planned to embrace dear Ernest within the same wise, gentle coils with which she had hogtied dear Alice. Yes, generously, self-sacrificially she would assume the tender leadership of the dear boy's dead mother. Always having his best interests at heart. And his dough.

"You're being awfully good to me," she said to Miss Fernandez. "To stand by like this during these terrible hours of anxiety."

"We are all children of God, Madame. Even the

bad ones of us."

"You can't mean that literally. Not Bert Jackson."

"Even he."

Mrs. Spang was saved from replying to this outrageous nonsense by Duggan, who came in and said: "It's all right. I've just had word. Sheriff's patrol is bringing them in. All safe. All done."

Later, in a charming restaurant back of Hallandale, away from people and places where they would be recognized, Miss Fernandez entertained Mrs. Spang and her daughter and a revived Ernest at dinner.

It was a pleasant meal, candle-lit, and served on a screened balcony overlooking a garden lush with flora of the temi-tropics. One incident would always remain, Miss Fernandez knew, happy in her thoughts.

Mrs. Spang, during the baked pompano, said incisively to Ernest: "I've decided about two months would be proper."

"For what, Mrs. Spang?"

"To show respect for your dear mother. An elaborate wedding before then would be in bad taste. After it I thought we could take an extended tour. Possibly Brazil and the Argentine. You're not to worry about a thing, dear Ernest."

Ernest looked at her thoughtfully.

"I'm not, Mrs. Spang."

"As long as there is a breath left in me I shall try to make up for your loss."

"We appreciate that, Mrs. Spang. Both Alice and I. But I'm afraid there won't be too many opportunities."

A chilly hand seemed to stroke Mrs. Spang's aging spine.

"Opportunities? I simply don't understand?"

"We will wait until the inquest and the funeral are over, Alice and I. Then we think a quiet church wedding, after which we're motoring west until the trial comes. We'll be planning where we care to live.

Naturally, we'll arrange to have you settled wherever you may wish."

Miss Fernandez signaled their waiter to pour more champagne.

"I shall advance a toast." She raised her glass. She looked at Ernest with fond, relieved eyes and said: "Good friend—to your coming of age."

FIND ONE CUCKABOO

by Harlan Ellison

MARTIN WAS dripping sweat all over my desk. It annoyed me. I closed my good eye to blot him out, and it did it, but I still heard his voice.

"Scodell, you've *got* to handle this for us! They know you, they trust you! They asked for you specifically! You've *got* to take this case!"

I wanted to get up and shove my fist down the noisy crumb's throat, but I couldn't afford it. Not at these prices.

It wasn't that I was turning down their job, actually. Considering the money they were offering, I was in no position to be choosy. And they were right, I suppose. I *was* the only one who could deal with the Sadler sisters. They trusted Martin and Meggles

with their finances, but they couldn't stand them otherwise. I could see why. They'd been in my office less than twenty minutes and already I despised them.

But I didn't particularly relish the idea of talking two kill-crazy old hags out of slaughtering some guy that had raped their sister.

I looked at the two sweating lawyers. One was leaning over my desk. He was a thin—boney thin—character with a fine, chiseled nose, sleek dark-brown hair and a twitch in his left cheek. His name was Stanley L. Martin.

The other was a florid Buddha of a man hiding behind the title R. Winston Meggles. Between the two of them they comprised half the firm of Martin, Meggles, Aaronson & Willis, Attorneys-at-Law and Stock Brokers. Investments handled discreetly, satisfaction guaranteed provided the price was right.

They were high-powered, and they represented, among others, Henrietta, Bertha (now deceased) and Janet Sadler, heirs to a whopping big Wall Street fortune. When they requested, smart operators didn't refuse.

As far as they were concerned, I wasn't a smart operator.

But they were stuck with me. The Sadler women had said, "Get Scodell," and they had to get Scodell. I looked past them at the frosted glass of my office door. I automatically reversed the backward legend there, reading the reason they were in my office: Sheckley Scodell, Private Investigations, Tracing, Process Serving. Walk In.

There were times I'd wished I had left that last sentence off.

I knew what they saw when they looked at me. A walking shirt advertisement. You know the one. The one where the fellow with the slight moustache, wearing a black eye patch, smiles at a beautiful wench. I'm a dead ringer.

Sheck Scodell, Private Investigator—Grade C, of

course—five foot eleven, one hundred and eighty pounds, one good blue eye, one good black eye patch, black hair, a permit to carry a gun.

The man in the shirt ad probably had a good peeker under that patch, I didn't. I'd lost mine in an argument with a man who'd had a beer can opener. I'd won the argument, but he'd won my eye. I'd never really figured who the real winner was.

That had been in the old days when I wanted to take life lightly and get involved in all sorts of ghastly capers. But I'd eased off, and tracing stray husbands was the roughest work I'd been doing lately.

Now these two had come in and tossed a fat salary in my lap if I'd baby-sit a couple of millionaresses. It looked good, from the outside, and if I'd been an outsider, I'd have grabbed it.

But there's an ingrained and unalloyed streak of cowardice I've picked up since that can opener sliced me. And my chicken-heart said hands off, good and loud! I didn't know why, exactly, but the thought of two, old, crone-like women hunting through the town of Hurlburt, Illinois for a crazy rapist that had sworn to get both of them, made me shy off a bit.

"How much?" I asked.

I forgot to mention I also have a streak of unalloyed greed.

Martin eased off my desk and the craftiness came back into his dark eyes. The less he offered me, the more was left in the Sadler accounts. "Five hundred."

"Pick another flunky for them peanuts."

"A thousand." The desperation was coming back.

"You're getting warmer," I said, enjoying his squirming.

"For Christ's sake, Scodell, what do you want, blood?"

"For every drop of blood I've got, the Sadler sisters have a hundred thousand dollars. I had two weeks with them once, and you're going to have to

up the ante a helluva lot before I'll go anywhere near those crazy women again. Start talking money!"

We played games a few more minutes till Meggles finally blew and snorted around Martin's greasy buck-hanging and offered me what I'd mentally set as minimum. It was approximately twenty times my regular fee.

Even at that I didn't figure I was being paid enough.

I'd never particularly liked the Sadler sisters. Not only were they cheap and crazy and obnoxious . . .

They were too wealthy.

Whatever the high-powered lawyers were otherwise, they were certainly efficient. They'd prepared a brief for me, to read on the plane—private plane, mind you—that was flying me lickety-split to the Sadler sisters' front door.

Before I read it, I ordered a whiskey and soda from the pert stewardess, and settling back with it, revived what *I* knew about the Sadler women.

Two years before, one sunshiney May afternoon, I'd received a call from Martin, Meggles, Aaronson & Willis, Etc.

They'd had a wealthy client (they'd used the singular on me, the slobs) who wanted to be shown around New York, and this client had seen my name in the phone book, and since M, M, A & W had checked my record and found me satisfactory, would I like to chaperone this client?

To which I'd said, why not, it's money, isn't it? To which they'd replied, yes, but carry a gun. Which had bothered me for a minute—the minute just before they'd named my fee—and no longer.

When I'd met the "client" I'd still wondered about the gun. Even though they were three Macbeth witches with about thirty million between them, it still seemed odd. But I'd stopped wondering after two weeks of outgoing Hell with the maniac Sadler sisters.

They'd had a penchant for dragging hansom-cab horses into the Latin Quarter and sideswiping patroling cops with their fire-engine red MG. Then I'd known I'd need a howitzer if I ever saw them again.

To top it off, they hated one another with a grim and biting ferocity. The atmosphere was always charged, and since they were almost identical triplets, I had the impression mirror images were snapping at one another. It was a time to remember —a time to forget. A time to remember to forget!

I'd accepted their twittering thankees for the delightful fortnight in the Big Town, blown them off, cashed their check which now seemed inadequate, and relapsed to my office for a stiff sleep and a stiff drink—not necessarily in that order.

All I'd heard from them in the past two years had been a carton of jelly preserves, which I'd donated to the Second Avenue Mission Home, unopened.

Now it seemed, I was going to renew old acquaintances, God help me!

The brief was brief, and painfully concise.

The Sadler sisters numbered three, each fifty-six years old, and enough wealth from ancestors who had sold slaves and rum in the Good Old Days to be cantankerous and get what they wanted.

They had been sheltered well into their old age—for them, fifty-six was old age—and the trip to New York had been the only significant stepping outside Hurlburt, Illinois, the ancestral home.

According to a detailed statement from the two surviving sisters, Bertha, one night, had desired a strawberry milk shake, and deported herself onto the darkened streets of Hurlburt in search of same.

Sometime between nine twenty-five and ten forty, sister Bertha had met a maniac, been slashed, outraged, and dumped into a stand of tall grass in an empty lot.

The guy *must* have been a maniac. Bertha had been fifty-six, remember?

The sisters had set up the banshee wail and forced the town *gendarmes* to blockade all roads in and out of Hurlburt, on pain of something or other if they didn't.

It had been done so quickly, in fact, they were certain the cuckaboo was still somewhere in Hurlburt. Their opinion had been backed up, in fact, by a strange occurence. A note had been discovered the next day, in the Sadler mailbox. It had been short and to the point. I blush to repeat the exact wordage, but it was apparent that our boy was going to give the surviving Sadlers exactly and precisely what old Bertha had gotten.

The thought repulsed me, and I was *dead sure* the guy was a cuckaboo!

The next few days had seen the sisters cruising the streets of that sleepiest of Illinois hamlets with police service automatics drawn and unquestionably loaded.

The townsfolk *knew* they were loaded, because Rafe Trunkel, pharmacist of the Sadler's acquaintance, had ridiculed the old girls with words of getting off the streets with them danged sidearms.

Rafe had promptly been forced to dive through his own Rx front window to avoid a blast from Henrietta and Janet.

After that, Sheriff Turpin had politely requested the marauding women to put their guns away. He'd only asked once.

The report indicated the Sadlers had leveled their fire-power at Turpin's tummy and suggested he *git!*

He had gotted.

Now the Sadler girls wanted help, and they'd remembered Sheck Scodell, their New York guide, and I was swamped with long green to bail them out of the situation at hand.

Said situation seeming to be either (a) getting them out of the way and cooled off so the legal law enforcement agencies could be at the bushes properly for the cuckaboo, who, since he'd tipped his

hand by leaving the note, was unquestionably still holed-up in Hurlburt, or (b) finding the maniac myself.

Neither one of them sounded particularly appetizing to me.

A chauffeured limousine met us at the airfield and we gunned past a brace of signs telling the world at large that TRESPASSING PUNISHABLE BY FINE OR IMPRISONMENT awaited them should they look cross-eyed at the Misses Sadler's property.

We sped through Hurlburt toward the Sadler mansion of which I'd heard fables, and I wasn't surprised to find the chauffeur breaking all sorts of speed limits. There wouldn't be much chance of mistaking that long black Rolls Royce, and the Sadlers had too much money for any rustic judge to try whipsawing them into court on any puny speeding charges.

It was a small thing, but it showed the Sadler influence in that corner of the Universe. I was duly impressed.

We passed one of the road barricades. It was tight and effective. No one could have gotten through.

Hurlburt raced toward us. It was one of the innumerable dreary Illinois towns dozing and dozing in the cultural afternoon. Never awakening till someone threw something pleasant like a front-page murder-rape at them.

The streets were all tree-lined and immaculate. The homes all neatly painted, fenced, dormered and porticoed. The negro and manufacturing sections out of the way. The highway cleverly diverted through the business section to rope in starving travellers. It was typical.

Yawningly typical.

I started to yawn.

The chauffeur broke protocol, called over his shoulder through the open window between us: "Where do you think the guy is hiding?"

I stopped yawning.

Yeah, where *was* my cuckaboo hiding? Over there in the basement of that boarded-up old house? Across the street in the bell tower of the First Baptist Church of Hurlburt? Back the way we'd come in one of the ditches bordering the Super Shopping Center? Where? Where?

And then, too, when I thought about it carefully . . . *why?*

Why a cuckaboo? Why a rape and murder of a fifty-six year old millionaress? There must have been more eligible women to attack. There couldn't have been enough money in it; she obviously wouldn't be carrying much with her. Why the note? Why tip off the police you're still in town? Why bug the two remaining sisters? What the hell was this all about?

Someone was going to have to be pretty slick with the answers before I'd be satisfied. The setup was decidedly floozy, to say the very least. I couldn't imagine what the most might be.

"I have no idea," I answered him, with a frown.

A frown, and no yawn.

They were just as I'd remembered them, and it all came back to me at once.

I'd been shown my room. I'd washed up, changed into something more detectivey-looking, and come downstairs into the huge oak-panelled drawing-room.

The Sadler sisters were there, just as I'd pictured they would be.

The Sadler sisters were the most clutching, hateful, vindictive, parsimonius, ugly, nth-degree adjectivated rich-bitches I'd ever encountered. And though there were only two left, the hate that trembled between them was still strong and apparent. It made the whole deal just that much more pleasant.

When I saw them, it all came back, and the smell of loathing closed in on me. I somehow felt unclean

around them.

Their bodies sagged S-shaped into dollar signs in their overstuffed twin chairs. An empty one sat beside the other two. Their eyes looked as though they were cash register plackets ready to ring NO SALE. Their hands instinctively clawed grabby-wise on the knobbed arms of their chairs. They were bird-like and grey, and they made me ill.

But they were paying through the nose, even if they were unaware of it, and I loved them.

"Hello, hello, the Sadler sisters!" I boomed, striding purposefully into their antimacassered drawing-room.

They disliked me, that was evident. I was a normal human being, reasonably attractive, and able to get along with people. They disliked that. They had been chained to a fortune all their lives, and they had erected barriers of hatred against all and any who lived happily and normally.

But they had their wealthy ethic which decreed they be charming and hospitable. As charming and hospitable as two old witches could be.

Twitter, twitter, chirp, chirp.

They sounded more and more like a pair of barn sparrows every time I heard them. "Mr. Scodell, it's so nice to see you again. We're so glad you could come."

As though it were a weekend frolic. As though I were a houseguest, not a private detective hired to find their sister's murderer.

"Glad to make it," I bubbled, wondering if my bubbling would turn into frothing in a moment.

"This dreadful thing is coming to a head, you know. We plan to route out the unspeakable filth that did this, you know. We have him at bay, you know." They went on and on, with my knowing, and I didn't know at all, but I nodded and bobbed my chops in rhythm, and they reveled in it.

They had the damndest way of speaking almost in unison. Intricate sentences they couldn't possibly

have pre-planned, tumbled out of them *a capella*, facial expressions and hand movements identical, words paced together.

It was weird and unnerving.

Particularly with that carefully-accented and spaced Midwestern dialect of theirs. Why couldn't they talk a normal guttural as any sane New Yorker would?

Just about then, looking for all the world like a re-incarnation of the 1930 Eric Von Stroheim, complete to bald, shining skull, the liveried butler, Hemingway (so help me God!) oozed in, announced Sheriff Turpin, and oozed out again.

Then came the Sheriff. Well, he was the end. This character was *too* much. Straight out of Scattergood Baines. He was a round, roly-poly thing with brown eyes the size of doorknobs and a face that was all paste and What-Did-You-Say-Your-Name-Was?

He was dressed in jeans, a lumberjack shirt, a slouch hat stuck full of trout flies, hip boots, a creel over one shoulder, a rod and reel over the other, and, so help me God again, a stalk of grass in his mouth.

Which way was the exit?

Then he opened his mouth and the most cultured voice I think I've ever heard tumbled out of those gooey lips.

"We may have your man, Miss Henrietta, Miss Janet."

The Sadlers sat up straighter in their plush chairs and made identical motions toward their identical sewing baskets. I had a sneaking hunch a pair of blue-steel automatics lay among the knits-and-perls.

"Where did you find him? How do you know? Can we get to him, let's get to him," the sisters chimed. They had a strange look on their faces; a mixture of bewilderment and ferocity.

Turpin raised a pudgy hand to hold them off. He saw the fishing rod in his hand and looked embarrassed. "They were running pretty well, today,"

he chuckled, by way of explanation, and leaned it against the fireplace.

The Sadler sisters were beginning to rise, but Turpin stopped them with a word.

"Sorry, he's out-of-bounds to you ladies. I don't want any trouble. He's incommunicado. I'm waiting till this high-powered detective of yours gets in from New York, and we'll question him together. If I let you two in there, no telling what'd happen to him. He'd confess to anything if you got at him for a while."

They began to say something, but Turpin cut them off again. Then he must have caught my movement in lighting a cigarette; he turned and noticed me for the first time.

"Scodell's the name, Sheriff. Sheck Scodell. I'm the high-powered you were talking about. Care to go question that suspect?" I smiled at him in what I hoped was a charming, disarming manner, but he continued to stare. I knew he was taking in the black eye patch, little moustache, greying hair and charcoal grey suit. I don't much look like a private detective. I'm afraid I'm too pretty.

"I said, *Sheriff* . . ."

That seemed to snap him out of it, and he hurried across to me, hand outstretched. He winced as we shook—I applied pressure—and out of the corner of my eye I could see Henrietta and Janet smiling at each other.

I gathered there was an amused tolerance—or intolerance—between the Sadlers and Turpin.

"Glad to meet you, Scodell. The ladies have spoken a great deal about you. Sorry I took so long to notice you, but this is the first break we've had here, and well, you know—"

I cut off his gibbering. I'd had that routine too often before.

"I understand, Sheriff. Understand perfectly. Now what's all this about a suspect?" I figured it was best to be a demanding, pompous ass for a while. It

put the home-towners on the defensive, made it easier for me to work.

"Yes, that's right," he said, "we think we've found our man. Found him lurking around outside the high school about an hour ago. They called me in from the River."

I saw the sisters look at each other quickly, the same strange look on their faces. "What do you mean 'lurking'?" I asked.

"Well, you know, he was sort of walking around the school, stranger in town. Figure he was waiting; looked like he was kind of waiting for someone to come out. Figure he's the one. Only newcomer in town in weeks, and he was here before the—uh—accident. Gave us a dickens of a fight before my deputies could bring him in." He seemed pleased with himself, but there was a forced quality to his voice, as though his jollity were there for our benefit.

"We want to *see* the bounder!" yelled Henrietta. At least I thought it was Henrietta. I was always getting them confused, they looked so witheredly alike.

"Now, just tut-tut," Turpin put her off. "In good time, Janet, in good time." It wasn't Henrietta.

He turned back to me and I re-asserted my desire to meet the poor unfortunate he had apprehended outside the high school. I had another hunch he wasn't our rapist at all. Not at all.

Turpin scratched his jelly-apple nose. "Why, certainly, we'll go over there right now, Mr. Scodell." He picked up his rod—the line was hideously snarled—and tipped his fly-stuck hat all around the room. "Just stopped by to let you ladies know things are moving. Now, Henrietta, Janet, you keep to the indoors, out of the way, and make sure you're careful with those guns."

What he said was innocuous, but there was a deep meaning behind it that was clear—at least to me. If he wanted the Sadlers indoors, he was pretty certain the man in the jail house wasn't my cuckaboo.

"We want to go along!" they chimed together. *The Andrews Sisters, minus one,* I thought idiotically.

"No, you just stay here now," said Turpin, turning to leave. He motioned me to follow, and I fell in behind.

As we passed through the front door, Hemingway stared at us so malevolently, I felt impelled to tell him, "Take care of the Royalty." I jerked my thumb toward the drawing-room.

He stared at me even more malevolently.

I followed the rural peacemaker out to his black Ford, wondering how I'd managed to hit so many cliches in one small town.

I decided it was Fate.

The poor slob was Farley Upton, a traveling salesman out with a line of Japanese-made novelty items for souvenir shops. He'd been pantingly waiting for one of the local loose ladies in her tender teens to finish sleeping through classes and come flying to his arms.

He was innocent as a new-born babe with the mark of Cain.

Turpin pointed him out with a meaty forefinger, let me talk to Upton for a few minutes, then showed me back into his office. I fell into a chair and pulled out my cigarette case while Turpin stowed the hat and fishing equipment.

"What'd you have to dream up to drag him in?" I asked.

He looked at me sharply, then reddened. "Loitering," he sighed, flopping into the chair behind his desk. He couldn't quite look me in the eye.

"He isn't your man," I said, looking at the ceiling with authority, pulling on the cigarette the same way.

"Know it," he replied.

"How long can you hold him?"

Turpin shrugged. "Long enough at least to keep the Duchesses off my back, I hope." He looked like

a beaten and worried cop, and I suddenly felt sorry for him. But I respected him, too. Turpin was no hick. He looked as though he might even be a damned competent policeman. That Oxford accent wasn't put on; he'd picked it up somewhere and I was willing to bet it was either Oxford itself or study with New Scotland Yard. I wondered if the lines in his face had come from this case. Accent or no, this case seemed to be out of his line.

"What have you got for me?" I asked.

"What do you know?"

"The essentials. Bertha got it a week and a half ago on Friday night between 9:25 and 10:40. The boy who did it is still around, having planted a love note in the Sadler mailbox. No clues, no suspects." I added the last with a nod in the direction of the traveling salesman.

"There's a little more," he said, pulling out a desk drawer. He propped his hip-booted feet on it. "We've ruled out any collusion on the part of the sisters—far-fetched though it might seem we considered it—because Bertha's ten million was separate from the other's money and reverts automatically to the Sadler Corporation. No motive there."

That surprised me. I thought it was a very possible line of suspicion, but this knocked it off quick-like.

He went on, "The double-indemnity clause of her insurance policy gives them, as beneficiaries, a fantastic sum, but it's peanuts compared to what they have already, so it doesn't figure from that angle, either.

"There was no sense to the thing. No apparent motive. The Sadlers have enemies, of course; who wouldn't with that much money. But those are primarily because of their crankiness and cheapness. Enemies more of personality than of fortune." He shrugged again.

"That's why we think it's an out-of-towner," he clipped the words short. That educated voice was

incongruous coming as it did from his jelly-shape.

He continued, myself suitably saucer-eyed and attentive, "We haven't been able to turn up a thing at the scene, except blood." The way he said it made me think of streams and rivers and oceans. "No footprints, no weapon, no signs of a struggle, no fingerprints, no nothing." He spread his hands in hopeless dejection.

I crossed my legs. There was something in what Turpin had said. Something not quite right. Suddenly it hit me what it was. Something about the scene of the rape, and I remembered Bertha Sadler's noisiness in New York. She'd been a terror when she'd wanted to be—not subdued as her nature required in Hurlburt.

"No sign of a struggle, did you say?"

He nodded, looking terribly sad about it all. "That's right. Not a thing. The bushes weren't trampled, there weren't any bruises on her, there was no skin or hair under her fingernails, her clothes weren't torn—except where the knife had gone in."

He brought his feet down with a thump. "She was knifed, and *then* raped, Scodell."

I'd heard about that kind of stuff, but I'd never thought I'd run up against any of it. I suddenly wanted to be deathly ill from the thought of it. Now I knew part of what had been chewing on Turpin. This cuckaboo was as sick as they come. And more dangerous than I'd thought.

Even so, I had other ideas about the reason for no signs of a struggle. I slid off the chair with a sigh to indicate I'd gotten all I wanted from him.

"I'll check back with you later, Sherrif," I said, leaning across to shake hands, "there are a few things I want to check on my own." I didn't apply pressure this time and he seemed surprised.

He nodded and said to my back, "Oh, by the way, do you carry a gun, Scodell?" I turned around and smiled at him, unbuttoning my jacket. I let him see the criss-crossed butt of the .32 Police Special. I

patted it affectionately. It's a small gun, but a good one. I like it.

"Good things come in small packages, Sherriff." I walked out, knowing his eyes were on me.

The town of Hurlburt took me with all the warmth of a forming snowstorm. Strangers just *weren't* accepted form in that section of the universe when police barricades were up and they knew a rape-killer was at large. They didn't give any particular damn whether this stranger *was* a private eye or not. They obviously disliked the Sadler women and anyone connected with them. Nasty stares trotted along behind me.

I walked down Main Street, looking in shop windows, ogling the rural simplicity of style and desire, while the natives ogled me with about the same.

I figured I'd stop in at Rafe Trunkel's drug store and have a chat with him about this and that. I didn't have any trouble locating it; the windows were still boarded up from his leap for life.

A little bell jangled as I opened the door, and the interior was cool and dark and exotic-smelling. It was an apothecary's, not one of the modern department store monstrosities, carrying everything from sandhog outfits to baby alligators for the kiddies. It was an old shop, an honest shop, and it brought back childhood memories.

"Just a second," a voice floated out of the immensities behind the counter. "Be right with ya." And he was, too.

Rafe Trunkel was a spare man with a cleft chin, blue eyes that bugged in such a way I could have sworn they preceded him by half a foot, long arms that stuck out of the sleeves of an old zipper-front cardigan, long legs that stuck out of grey pin-striped pants saved from an ancient suit, and a wide, gaping, gnome-like mouth. In the first moment I liked him thoroughly. He was, indeed, thoroughly likeable, thoroughly typical of small-town life.

"Mr. Trunkel?" I asked, and when he nodded I began, "I'm Sheck Scodell. I've been hired by the Sadler sisters to investigate the murder of their sister Bertha. I heard . . ."

That was as far as I got. His roar cut me off. That wide mouth bellowed something indistinguishable and he began waving pipe-cleaner arms at me. I rather gathered the Sadler name affected him perversely.

"Get outta my store! Get outta my store!" He was yelling so loud, I could hear the faint tinkle of bottles jiggling on the shelves. Yelling and waving, waving and yelling. I tried to placate him.

"Take it easy, Mr. Trunkel, take it easy. I just wanted some information. You don't want—take it *easy* now—you don't want people to say Rafe Trunkel was a bad example of Hurlburt hospitality, do you?" That touched the proper sounding and he calmed down. I smiled at him. I hoped I was doing it disarmingly.

"Sorry," he apologized, Illinoising the words. He seemed sheepishly ashamed, now that the outburst was finished. "Ever since those two crazy women took potshots at me, I've been on edge." He looked belligerent for a moment. "You'd be on edge, too, if every danged customer came in begging you to leap through your front window cause they'd heard you was a fancy dive artist!"

I couldn't help smiling, but I sympathized with him. In a small town like Hurlburt, that kind of ribbing could become deadly.

"What exactly happened, Mr. Trunkel?" I asked.

"Who knows? How should I know what makes them two danged females do what they do? Nobody in this town understands 'em. All that money must of set 'em off somewhere," he said, tapping his temple significantly. He shook his finger a moment, as though trying to form a thought. "All that money, and they're the cheapest things in the world. They still owe me for cough medicine and sleeping pills

and brewer's yeast tablets from two months ago! They got more money than Jehovah and they still won't pay their danged bills. Figure just because I'm a local businessman they can stall me as long as they please! Danged women!"

He seemed about to go off again, so I coughed loudly.

All druggists are alike that way. He looked at me with concern. "Say, y'know, that's a pretty bad hack y'got there. I've got some codeine back here in prescription that might help it . . ."

I had him on my side. "No, thanks, that's okay, Mr. Trunkel, it's a little something I've had since my —uh—accident." I touched my eye patch. He looked at me in confusion for a second, trying to figure how my eye could affect my throat, finally gave it up as a medical intricacy, and bobbed his head with understanding and embarrassment. He smiled with friendliness. *He should live so long,* I thought, smiling with friendliness, also.

"But tell me—may I call you Rafe?—tell me, Rafe, what happened with you and the Sadler sisters? What exactly made them shoot at you? There must have been a reason."

I'd thought meerschaums had gone out of style and stock, but he dragged a charred one from his pants pocket and began cleaning it with a twopenny nail. "Tell you the truth, Mr. Scodell, I really don't know."

He dumped the scrapings on the floor and put away the nail. One pocket of his sweater held loose tobacco and he fingered out a bowlful as he spoke. "I was standing right out there," he nodded his head toward the front door as he lit the pipe with a big kitchen match, "and along came them two danged Sadler women in their big car, cruisin' real slow, with them danged pistols of theirs sticking out the windows and I started laughing and the car stopped." He drew in huge cheekfuls of smoke and let his face become blank.

It wasn't much of a trick for him.

"I told 'em to get off the street with them danged guns, and they started screeching like a pair of night hawks. Danged old crones! Wasn't no reason for them to take on so; I didn't really say anything!

"Next thing I knew them danged females was shooting up my store front and I tried to stop 'em. Well, they took a couple of good ones over my left ear and I didn't stop to think where I was headin' and just took off through the window. Danged women!"

I wanted to ask him a question, but I figured I'd wait till the end of the conversation.

Instead, I said, "Have they been out on the town much with those guns, Rafe?"

He shrugged, and a puff of smoke accented the movement. "Oh, they got some danged notion they can find this here murderer if they look hard enough for him." He lowered his voice, speaking confidentially, "Tell ya a little somethin', Mr. Scodell, I don't even think this here fella's still in town. Wild goose chase, that's what!"

He pointed the pipe-stem at me. "One thing I got to admit, if that fella *is* around, those women are sure hot after him, wherever he is—and I pity him when they find him."

The rest of our conversation was worthless from the standpoint of new information, and I decided Rafe Trunkel had done me as much good as he was able. He'd told me one thing, at least, which I'm sure he didn't think worth note, that I'd filed away for further use.

"Well, thanks, Rafe, and I'll probably be seeing you again soon." I decided I could afford the deviltment, so I asked him the question:

"Just one thing I wanted to know, Rafe . . ."

"What's that, Mr. Scodell?" he asked.

"Do you ever use the word 'damn'?"

I walked back to the Sadler mansion and let my-

self in. It wasn't any problem getting through the few police stationed outside the fence, and a side door off the kitchen was open. My going in the back way didn't have any significance, and I wasn't playing the skulking private eye—I just couldn't take Hemingway, the butler. He made me think of late, late, late night television movies of Charlie Chan. I'm sensitive that way.

The place was silent, not even the maids or servants swirling here and there. Henrietta and Janet were nowhere in sight. I decided to lie down for an hour or so before dinner; the plane trip and running around Hurlburt had tired me out more than I'd thought at first. Then too, dinner with the Sadlers was an ordeal and right then I didn't feel quite up to it.

I started upstairs. I was on the first landing when I heard the moan.

It came out of the woodwork and crawled up my body. It hit my brain at the same time the goosepimples broke out. I've got a strong stomach, but that moan was the last chord of an agony symphony. Whoever had let that out of his throat was real unhappy.

I took the steps two at a time, hit the second floor landing my revolver in my hand. I stood there with the deep pile rug up around my ankles and listened, holding in my breath.

Nothing.

That was all. Just one groan and silence. Whoever'd let that cry fly, wasn't in any condition to fling any more. Whether dead or just incapacitated, he was in no moaning condition. It was easy to tell, just from that one wail. I heard footsteps behind me and turned around quickly.

One of the Sadlers was just closing and locking a door that looked like all the others. I caught a glimpse of a flight of stairs behind it, before she closed it.

"Something wrong, Miss Sadler?" I asked, quietly.

She turned around and her haggy face was dead-white. She was afraid of something. It was written in Gregg across her eyes.

"Why—uh—*no*, Mr. Scodell." Wetting her lips, she made vague movements with her hands. "Why . . . why do you ask?"

"I thought I heard someone moan a second ago." I watched her closely.

She twitched and I knew I'd heard what I'd heard. "Oh, yes. It was myself, Mr. Scodell. I was upstairs in the attic, putting away some of dear Bertha's things in trunks, and one of the lids fell on my hand." She wiped a tear from her eye. I didn't see the tear, but she did it so well, I was almost convinced there had been one. She held out the supposedly injured hand for me to see.

So what was to see?

I made clucking noises as though I'd seen evidence of a painful mishap there, holstered my gun and said, "You'd better watch things like that, Miss Sadler. We want to keep you in good shape, you know. The Sadlers are important to Hurlburt, Miss Janet." I was taking a chance it *was* Janet.

She smiled, didn't bother correcting me on her name, and I made a fast getaway. Once in my room, I felt duty-bound to mutter, "In a blind pig's eye . . ." to myself.

So Janet Sadler was afraid of something. Yeah, but what? It was reasonable to expect her to be constantly worried, what with a screwloose murderer sworn to get her; but neither of them had shown much nervousness when I'd seen them earlier, so I doubted that was it.

There was a piece to this little puzzle someone was keeping hidden from me. I was suddenly afraid they'd stop hiding it and let me know what it was.

I hung my jacket on the back of a chair, slipped off my shoes and flopped onto the bed. There was something out of focus in Hurlburt, Illinois. There were a few things that didn't seem to fit into the

obvious pattern. I lit a cigarette and blew a thin plume of smoke toward the ceiling.

First, there was the total insanity of the crime.

That might be accepted if the mad rapist idea was accepted. But then, if the fellow *was* still in town, why had he sent that note to the Sadlers? Why had he remained in town at all- It only weakened his position. If he was an out-of-towner, as the Sherrif suspected, he'd have gotten out as quickly as possible; if he was a native of Hurlburt, as I thought more likely, he would have quietly faded into the landscape and let everyone rush around looking for strangers. So why the note?

No matter *how* insane a man might be, he wouldn't knowingly leave clues around that he was still in town. It only put people on the alert.

The more I thought about the Sherrif's theory of a stranger, the less likely I thought it was. What made everyone think it was a stranger? Perhaps they thought they knew each other well enough in this small town. Well, they might, but . . .

How would a stranger select the Sadler women? Perhaps one of them might be raped because she was available—though again, the madness of selecting Bertha Sadler, struck me—but how could a stranger possibly know there were two other sisters?

Or, granting he *did* find out somehow, why would he wish to kill them? The note had arrived before they'd started looking for him around town. He couldn't have a grudge for *that* reason.

Was it hatred for another reason? Persecution complex? Business rival? Someone they'd done dirt? They were pretty nasty old women, but I couldn't conceive of anyone going that far for vengeance.

It just didn't click. A resident of Hurlburt would be more likely.

It was like an amateur's idea of a clever crime.

There were too many intricacies, too many loose ends because of the intricacies.

Why were there no signs of a struggle where

Bertha was killed? It was certainly a violent enough death. What sort of madman would defile a corpse after he'd committed the murder? The thought was hideous.

Then, too, there was a bit more to the incident with Rafe Trunkel than had been reported in the brief I'd read. More than appearances would indicate. It just didn't click.

I was still trying to sort out the questions, before I started in on the possible answers, when Martin and Meggles arrived.

Martin had picked up some politeness from somewhere since the day before. He took the trouble to knock on my bedroom door.

"Come," I yelled, and he did, too.

That wasn't the first thing that day that had surprised me, but seeing Martin in Hurlburt was high on the list for sheer shock content. "Protecting the holdings?" I inquired, motioning him to shut the door.

Then I took a second look.

That man was scared. Good and scared. At least as much as Janet Sadler had been when I'd caught her locking the door to the attic. But he was scared in a different way. It looked as though it were a cleaner type of fright.

"Sit down, Martin," I said. He took the shapeless blob by the window, and sank into it with a sigh. I wasn't sure whether it had come from him or that parody of a chair.

"Is it as bad as your pallor shows?" I asked.

He nodded, and I had the impression he wanted to bury his face in his hands, but wouldn't because it might look too melodramatic.

"What's the matter? What brought you in from New York?"

He made clenching motions with his hands as though he were trying to squeeze the words out. Then he ran them through his seal-like hair. Then

he rubbed the bridge of his fine nose. "Will you stop the contortions and tell me what the hell is on your mind, Martin!"

He stopped, self-consciously, and took a deep breath.

"There's three million dollars missing from Bertha Sadler's accounts." He said it matter-of-factly, but the despair in his voice would have sunk Atlantis.

"Th—th—three . . . uh . . ." I sat up in bed, quickly. So quickly I heard my bones pop. I couldn't get the words out, finally resorted to raising three fingers. He nodded.

Then I smelled the bedspread burning and quickly grabbed the butt I'd dropped in astonishment. I brushed the ashes off and noticed the fine brown hole that had been burned. It seemed to make things normal again.

"How?" I asked, slipping my legs off the bed.

He spread his long thin hands. Even though he was silent, the hands said he had no idea.

I had my shoes on and found myself pacing in front of his chair, rubbing the back of my neck at the hair line. "Is Meggles with you? Or either one of your other partners?"

"Meggles," he answered, looking even more scared. He inclined his head toward the door and I assumed he meant the Buddha was downstairs. "Tell me everything you know."

By this time the concept of three million dollars gone, seemed more believable and I could talk. It was one thing to know you were in a house where thirty million lived, but another to hear someone say they'd misplaced three of those millions.

He fumbled for a moment, then began, "I've been integrating Bertha's accounts into the Corporation. Meggles was originally supposed to handle the paperwork, but a last minute thing came up and in the shuffle, he was put on that, and I went on with the integrating. He made a fuss about it, but it was too far into the work for me to quit. After I'd been

on it for a few days, I began to notice whole blocks of ownings and assets completely gone. I was almost finished with the work when they told us to call you in. After you'd left, yesterday, I went back home and finished checking. All those holdings sold, displaced, manuevered. I checked them back; they were handled through Meggles. He must have thought he could cover more completely in the event of her death. He usually handles such things, and there was no reason to think he wouldn't this time. It was merely chance that he didn't."

He was perspiring freely, looking at me imploringly. "The man has effectively transferred three million dollars worth of holdings into his own name or under jurisdiction of corporations he secretly controls. I don't know what to do. I don't know what the sisters will do to all of us when they find out."

He dragged to a halt and his face crumbled. I could see his position. It wasn't pleasant. Even though he'd had nothing to do with the machinations of Meggles, he was also responsible. I pitied the greasy slob.

"Does Meggles know you've found out?" I asked.

He paused a moment, then: "No, I don't think so. I've been doing the transferrances at my home. He came in with me, and he didn't seem to be nervous, or know I'd uncovered anything.

Now that Martin and Meggles were here, and I knew what I knew about Meggles's embezzlement, I had precious information. I had another piece in the puzzle. It was starting to make a little more sense now. I hardly heard Martin add, "We came in at the Sadlers' request. Business talk, I suppose."

Or a conference on another kind of business, I thought.

There was one more thing I had to know, then I'd have the whole deal figured cold.

"Has Meggles been out of New York recently? Where was he when Bertha Sadler was killed?" It was an important question, and I was hoping I'd

get a neon answer.

"In the hospital, getting a medical checkup. I was visiting him the night it happened. I know what you're thinking; he stole from them, but my God, no, he couldn't have done it."

My neon tube exploded.

It had been the wrong answer.

I was back where I'd started . . . or almost.

Dinner was a sterling silver extravaganza in a discordant key.

The dining room was monstrous, lined with dark-wood breakfronts on both sides and long, low tables in between. The dining table was round and highly polished under the brilliant linen tablecloth. Crystal and silver tinkled and reflected at each other. But the elegance was dimmed by the undercurrents of fear and hatred. They trembled between us, reflected back from the magnificence of the crystal chandelier.

They had me seated between Janet and Henrietta, across from Martin, and three places removed from where I'd wanted to be. Meggles was having trouble with his soup.

I kept watching him, and ignoring the Sadler gibbering. He kept watching his soup bowl, also apparently ignoring their noise. His face was low to his spoon, and his spoon was low to the soup. Meggles was thinking, hard.

"Do you like our little town, Mr. Scodell?" one of the hags twittered.

"Mmm."

"General Bartholemew Hurlburt was born here, you know," Henrietta added.

"Mmm."

"Have you found any clues, Mr. Scodell?" Janet asked. She pronounced *clues* as though it were the first word in a bad detective novel, as though she were impressed with the sound and meaning of the word.

I looked up quickly. She was still looking at me queerly. The afternoon had stuck with her.

"Mmm," I said, going back to my soup and surveillance.

They said a few more trivialities, and I was getting set to mumble something a bit more coherent, when Hemingway saved me the bother.

"Letter for you, sir," he intoned sepulcherally, handing me a folded slip of dirty note paper. "It was in the mail box, sir," then he oozed out of the dining room.

If I'd been a little younger, I'd have suspected that man of *anything!*

They were all watching me: Martin, Meggles, Janet and Henrietta. I looked at them, then at the note. I laughed nervously, "Guess my far-flung contacts are trying to get in touch with me."

"Aren't you going to read it, Mr. Scodell?" asked Janet.

"Huh? Oh . . . yeah, yeah, sure I am."

I unfolded the slip of paper and read it. It was right to the point:

I can't get out of town. I heard you were here and I want to give myself up to you. I'm afraid of the Sadlers and the town folks. Meet me at the stand of willow trees behind the Baptist Church at 11:00 alone. I'm desperate, and I want to give myself up. Please come!

It wasn't signed. The writing was in a sloppy scrawl, but easy to read. This pretty well knocked my current theory out of the running. So there *was* a cuckaboo! But it still didn't quite figure: why did he want to give himself up to me? Who was I supposed to me? Why not the Sherrif?

While I was sitting there blank-eyed, wondering if it was on the level or not, I felt warm breath on my neck.

I turned my head and stared directly into the Sadler's faces. I crumpled the note quickly, but I wasn't certain it had been quickly enough.

"Oh, just a note from the Sherrif," I tossed off, and the Sadler girls looked at one another with ill-concealed amusement.

The rest of the meal tasted like sawdust soufflé.

I cupped the cigarette in my hands, so the glow wouldn't let anyone know where I was. The position I was in afforded me a clear view of the rear of the Baptist Church, but it didn't leave my charcoal grey suit in very good shape. I was up in a tree.

The night was a chiller, and the stars knew it; they'd stayed at home, nice and warm. The only things out that night were hard-working swing-shifters, neckers, private detectives—and murderers. I pulled the collar of my topcoat closer around my neck, and let my hat come down almost touching it. It didn't help much.

Even though my left eye was gone, I'd trained myself to gauge distances carefully with the right one. I was about one hundred yards from the church, in the tallest tree of the stand.

I'd been there four hours. If my cuckaboo said eleven o'clock, it probably meant he was going to be there at nine. If he was going to be there at nine, I was going to be there an hour before him. And so I had been.

But he hadn't showed yet.

I was stiff from crouching there. I'd worked myself into a dozen different positions, telling myself that each one was more comfortable than the last, though I knew they were all painful and annoying. The cold had seeped in long since. My legs were slowly numbed and I had to keep pulling off my gloves and shoving my hands inside my jacket, into my armpits, to keep them from doing the same. My breath puffed out in whispering clouds.

I straight-armed my watch into sight.

Five minutes to eleven.

Why did he want to give himself up to me?

The church was a huge and quiet pointed shadow-thing there in the dark. The only lights all around it were the three spots the members of the congregation had set out, shining against the building. A discourager, they thought, to the neckers who parked in the church lot to pursue their pleasure.

It hadn't worked. I glanced once more at the four cars parked widely apart, between the white circles of light that lay on the ground and against the building.

I started to rise, to change my position again; to rub my aching *gluutus maximus.* Sitting in any damned tree isn't fun. I stopped halfway in my movement.

A man had stumbled into the circle of light. I had my .32 clear and in my hand before I could wonder how my chilled fingers had responded so quickly. I slid out further on a big branch, peering through the drooping foliage of the willow. I was in a position to drop clear if I had to.

I couldn't see his features, but his face looked strangely bloody.

A young couple in one of the cars must have seen him, thought he was the local constabulary, and taken fright, for a motor started up and headlight beams splashed against the church. The car roared, gears clashed, it spun in a jerking U-turn and drove away fast.

The man had stopped dead in the center of one of the church spot beams. He was bathed in light. He looked lost. I knew he was unarmed, of course, by this time.

If he'd had a weapon, or if he'd intended to use one, he'd have pulled it when that car had started. But he hadn't. I knew he was clean, but the thing still didn't ring true.

I dropped out of the tree, bringing my knees up bent to cushion the fall. He must have seen me. He took a step in my direction, another. "Scodell?" he asked, querulously, into the night.

"Stop," I snapped. "Yeah, I'm Scodell," I answered, starting toward him, keeping the .32 leveled just in case my assumption was wrong. "You the boy who took care of Bertha Sadler?"

"I'm not—" he got out, then the night exploded.

Five big shots came out of infinity behind him, blossomed ball-like at the muzzles, lengthened themselves, and tore the cuckaboo's head apart. Whoever was shooting, they knew what they were doing. All five shots hit the man.

He spun, started to topple, stuck a foot out in front of himself as though he were a mechanical toy, took another step, let loose with an oddly familiar scream, and pitched over backwards, all twisted up and miserable looking.

I suddenly came back into possession of myself. I'd been rooted, watching the horror, but now I fell on my stomach and swung my gun around. I didn't know where they were—there were at least two of them, I'd seen the muzzle flashes—but I didn't want them potting at me.

Then the Sadler sisters walked out of the black, and stopped in the center of the dead white circle, looking down at the cuckaboo who was rapidly defiling church ground.

The big guns hung limp at their sides, as though their hands no longer wanted to hold them.

As if they had discovered it, the women threw the guns down.

Henrietta—I supposed it was Henrietta—looked up from the bloody ruin and stared directly at me where I was lying. She couldn't see me too well, I was certain of that, but I had the weirdest impression she was looking directly into my eyes.

"Mr. Scodell? Mr. Scodell? Are you there?"

She knew I was there.

"Yeah," I called back. I got up and brushed myself off. They'd covered the church lot with gravel, and small bits of it were imbedded in the heel of my hand. It hurt like hell, but it didn't bother me at all.

I had the last piece of the puzzle. What hadn't figured—figured at last.

I walked over to them, still holding onto the .32. They were looking down at the man again. I hadn't been close enough when he'd first come into the circle of light, to see what his face was like, and now I'd never know.

They'd done a brilliant job on him. He hadn't died instantly, but so close to it that it didn't make any difference. It was a wonder he'd been able to scream.

They looked up at me, and both spoke at once. This time I wasn't worried about their speaking in unison. Usually it wasn't rehearsed, just the coincidence of twins. This time I knew it wasn't coincidence.

They knew what they were going to say. They'd known for over a week. I'd string along, there wasn't any reason to let loose ends flap, but I decided I'd play a mental game, try to see if I could plot what they'd say, from what I knew, as they said it.

We're sorry, Mr. Scodell, I thought.

"We're sorry, Mr. Scodell," they said.

We read the note over your shoulder at dinner.

"We read that note at dinner, Mr. Scodell," they said.

We wanted to get the (any nasty adjective) man who killed our (any term of affection) sister ourselves, I thought.

"We wanted to bring to justice by our own hands the ghastly murderer who killed our dearest Bertha," they went on.

I didn't listen to the rest. Aside from the fact I wanted to vomit all over them, I knew what was coming. It didn't matter what they'd say.

I had them.

After the church caretaker had let me use the phone, and I'd intimidated him into watching the corpse to make sure the Sadlers didn't defile it any more, I came back to the circle of dead white light.

The caretaker was a tiny, hairy man, very much like a humanoid possum, with bright, darting eyes. He was shivering in the night without a jacket. I'd routed him out of the sack.

"Why don't you go back to bed," I said, as kindly as I could, feeling the way I did at that moment.

He looked at me with rural fear in his eyes and slunk off back to his rest. *You'll be seeing more than this soon,* I thought after him. *This is just the beginning.*

I took out my cigarette case and lit a butt, my fingers only now reacting with trembling to the cold. I stooped down and went through the man's pockets. I was certain I wouldn't find anything, but it had to be done.

No labels, no wallet, no keys, no money, no handkerchiefs to use for laundry marks, no nothing. Even the collar of his shirt had been torn away to eliminate that laundry mark.

One of the Sadlers coughed. I looked up.

They were watching me, and at that moment I was sure they knew I was on to the whole story. But they couldn't do anything. I'd already called the Sheriff, and the caretaker had seen the cuckaboo dead. If I was found dead, too, they might make a story that the man hadn't really been dead, and had taken a shot at me—but it was out of the question now. Too many others were in on it.

If they'd taken care of me when I'd first seen them, then they might have made it, but they'd never suspected I knew as much as I did. Now it was too late.

"He—he killed Bertha," one of them trembled.

"Yeah, killed," I said.

They kept looking at me, their hands quietly clawing at their skirts.

I smiled inwardly. All that money and a pauper like me was going to put them somewhere where all of it couldn't help them one little bit.

It was unpleasant, the whole thing, but gratifying.

I pulled my overcoat tighter about my throat and

stood smoking, waiting for the Sheriff.

We'd been ushered into the Sadler drawing-room for a complete statement of what had happened, and I had an impression that this should have been happening in England, and it should have been a classic detective story, complete with, "The butler did it."

But it wasn't, and the butler was just a creepy character with no more to do with the case than the false gentility of the Sadler women.

The drawing-room was somehow darker than the afternoon, though all the lights were on. Shadows hung like cobwebs, closing down on us. The Sadlers took their places in the overstuffed chairs, the empty one almost a presence in the quiet.

Turpin had no idea what was coming, and I felt sorry for him. But it had to be this way, because they all three had to be together—and a slip could mean they'd clam up and cover their tracks. It was going to surprise a few people.

The Sadlers had their claw-like hands flat on the armrests of their chairs, monarchs of their domain, erect and evil-looking in their postures. Martin was leaning against the mantelpiece and fat Meggles was on the big, overstuffed couch next to the cold fireplace. I stood by the door to the drawing-room, letting Turpin get things underway. I wanted to hear the fancies Janet and Henrietta were going to impart.

"Now," began Turpin, sitting on an end table, notebook in hand, "how did you ladies know this man was going to be in back of the Church tonight?" He looked more official than when I'd last seen him. A dark blue suit and tie covered his lumpy butterball figure.

"Sheriff Turpin," said Janet, "would you mind getting off our table? It's rather valuable." He got up, blustered something incoherent and leaned against the mantel with Martin. Janet and Henrietta had been placed, so I knew which was which this time.

"Would you please answer the question, ladies,"

Turpin resumed, trying to regain his lost dignity.

Henrietta spoke: "We saw the note Mr. Scodell received. He read it at the dinner table and we peeked over his shoulder." Her tone was one of a woman who knew she should have been ashamed of having done such a thing, but was strong in her conviction that she had done it for a good cause.

Her tone was as faked as that note had been.

Turpin looked over at me. I'd told him a few things in the churchyard, out of hearing of the sisters. The note had been one of them. But he didn't yet know it all.

"Have you any idea who the man was?"

"No," they answered in unison. Then Janet continued, "We'd never seen the murderer before. Will there be any trouble because we killed him? We know we lost our heads, shooting at him that way, but we thought he might kill Mr. Scodell!"

I couldn't stop laughing. Turpin had to come over and shake me by the arm. The Sadlers looked outraged. Yeah, sure!

They kept looking at me, Turpin did, too. I pushed myself away from the door, and locked it behind me, walking into the center of the room, and carefully sitting on the end table Turpin had used.

I pulled out my case and tapped a cigarette till it was packed correctly. I lit it and breathed smoke into the air. "What say we end this delightful fairy tale right now; how about it girls?"

They were silent, and stared at me silently. But their eyes were screaming.

I knew what they were screaming: *a thousand, a million, ten million, anything!* And I said, "Nothing."

Wildly, the Sheriff asked, "What are you talking about, Scodell?" He wasn't angry, just confused by my histrionics and my little mystery.

I decided it was time to pull the cork.

"That man wasn't the murderer of Bertha Sadler, Sheriff," I said, blowing a fine stream of smoke. He

stared at me, open-mouthed.

"Oh, he was in on it, all right," I added, "but he was really quite innocent of anything more than accesory to the crime."

"Perhaps you'd better explain yourself, Scodell," said Turpin slowly. He knew I was getting onto shakey ground.

So I explained. In neat, pigeon-holed deductions. I told them how Janet and Henrietta had found out that fat Meggles was stealing from Bertha's accounts. When I did, the sweating lawyer gave a tiny, animal squeal. I told them how Janet and Henrietta had seen the possibilities in such a condition.

For years, they must have been looking at one another like ripe fruit on a vine, waiting for one another to fall over a bar of soap, or catch pneumonia, or drop dead, and this was a perfect situation.

"First they badgered Meggles into admitting what he'd been doing, which probably wasn't difficult," I went on, nodding my head toward Meggles who was now positively swimming in his own sweat. "Then they planned a neat little way out for him. Of course, they were very quiet about all this. They didn't want beloved sister Bertha to get wise."

Turpin made as though he wanted to say something, then subsided. I went on, "They told him he could keep his previous thievings, or perhaps they promised him a cut, or some other arrangement—that isn't important now. Then they got him to find a hired gun. That's the boy in your cooler."

The Sadler women assumed an outraged expression. I took one look at them and laughed shortly. Their looks died, they sank back into silence again.

Meggles was sweating like a pig.

"Then they bought sleeping tablets from Rafe Trunkel. That's perhaps why they took a few shots at him. They thought he might remember, and they got scared and wanted to cover their actions. They must have learned to shoot better since the day they missed him, though. They were real fine tonight.

"They waited till Meggles got the gunsel into town, and put him up here in the house," I waved a hand toward the attic. "The night of the murder they doped sister Bertha good and proper, knifed her prettily, wrapped her in a sheet or some-such—" I kept watching them; I'd never seen faces so cold and deadly in my life, "—and turned the body over to the gunsel, who took it out and made it look like a rape."

Martin looked ill. So did Turpin. Meggles moved his bulk on the couch, and a fleck of froth appeared at the corner of his mouth. I didn't feel so well myself, once I'd said it.

"Grisly? Sure was. But at the rates the Sadlers were paying, a guy like that would do most anything.

"No one saw Bertha that night, so the only word we have that she went out for the alleged strawberry milkshake is that of her loving sisters." I bowed in their direction. The loving sisters looked as though they wanted my head on their mantelpiece.

"Can you back this up, Scodell?" asked Turpin.

I motioned him to wait a few minutes.

"When the gunsel got back here, after dumping the body, he was greeted with a surprise. Instead of being paid, he was tied up by the Sadler women—they probably slugged him beforehand—and stowed him in the attic.

"Then the fireworks started, and the misdirection, too. They got out guns and made big noises about finding the bastard that done in good old Bertha, and even went so far as to call me in. They weren't afraid I'd find anything, I'm not really a very effective detective, and they knew it. They must have checked my record, or had Meggles do it, and they knew I'd have been no problem. They were almost right, too."

I rubbed my eye patch. The skin itched under it. "I wouldn't have gotten on to anything, if they hadn't trusted the planting of Bertha's corpse to the

gunsel, who wasn't too smart in the first place. He made it look like a rape, but he didn't plant any scuffle signs. That was the first mistake.

"They left that note in their own mailbox to set up the idea the cuckaboo was still in town. They had something in store for the gunsel. After I got here, they found out that Martin was handling the transferrances of Bertha's assets, not Meggles, as they'd planned, and they got worried. So they called their lawyers here, knowing they'd be in on the payoff, hoping they could distract Martin till they could cover the thefts more carefully.

"I got the note, which they'd written, of course, and they made a good show of reading it over my shoulder. They didn't know Martin had already found the irregularities in the accounts and had spoken to me. Everything was in place then, except who had done the rape. Meggles couldn't have, he was in the hospital—probably nerves—so there was a piece missing. The guy who'd done the after-death rape."

I looked at the women again. I was surprised they hadn't snapped yet. They were cold ice, as they sat there. I suddenly wondered, with a cold chill, if I was wrong. If I was, I was through.

But I continued, "When I got the note, it all fell together, and the moan I'd heard in the afternoon figured, too. It was the gunsel. They had him in the attic, and they were knocking some silence into him.

"I didn't know exactly what was going to happen, but I went to the Church tonight, to find out. There was a chance he'd gotten away from them. They brought the poor slob over in their car, and shoved him out. He must have been groggy from the beatings they'd given him. They knocked him off before he could say anything.

"That was it. It wasn't simple, it was complicated, but it was all they could think of, and it almost worked. They'd have had a little unpleasantness about shooting the cuckaboo, but their money would

have gotten them off. Then Meggles would have made sure Bertha's remaining seven million got into their own accounts, and they'd even have insurance money as a little bonus. If the gunsel hadn't messed up the planting, and if Martin hadn't discovered the errors so soon and talked to me, they might have gotten away with it."

Then the Sadlers spoke: "You can't prove that." They said it quietly, and calmly, and for a split second I wondered if I could after all.

"Bet I can," I smiled, bluffing.

They lapsed back into silence.

"Can I borrow Meggles for a minute, Sheriff?" I asked.

"Well, I don't know, Scodell. This is—"

"I'm in hot water if I can't prove it, Turpin. I'd appreciate the favor." I could see he was impressed with what I'd said, so he gave me the nod. The Sadlers half-rose, but he just looked at them and they sank back.

I rather imagine it was partially his dislike for the sisters that helped him arrive at a decision in my favor.

I waggled a finger at Meggles.

"Come on, Counsellor," I said. He sat there and sweated at me. He was melting, he was so frightened.

"Up!" I said.

He rose slowly and I herded him before me to the door. I unlocked it and shoved him into the next room, closing the door behind us, but not all the way.

The man was terrified. His fat heaved and rolled as I prodded him in the stomach. I had to use shock treatment. The instant we were in the room, I whirled on him and spat the words in his face:

"They're going to back out on you, Meggles! They'll let you go to prison for the embezzlement! They'll say they had nothing to do with this! They'll say you killed Bertha and hired the gunsel! They'll let you burn! You want that, Meggles?"

I was rattling it into his face, leaning close. I could

smell the stink of his sweat. He was cold with agony. Then he broke.

He clutched at me with fat fingers.

"No, no, I'll tell you what happened! It was just as you said! They killed her! They stabbed her, they hid Pelmann upstairs, they did it to him!"

He would have gone on, but I pushed him ahead of me, back toward the drawing-room.

His voice had been loud enough. Just as we came through the door I saw the sisters leap up, almost as one, and make a break for the French windows.

They didn't make it. Martin tried to get in their way as they stumbled past him, and they shoved him out of the way. He went sprawling into a coffee table.

"Stop!" yelled Turpin, pulling his revolver.

They didn't, and he hesitated a moment. Shooting women isn't easy. He took a shot at their feet, but they kept going.

Janet smashed into the doors and they crashed open. The two women were out on the small portico, and across the lawn in a moment.

Turpin stumbled to the door, braced himself, and shot again. Henrietta pitched onto her face, sat up quickly clutching her shattered ankle. Janet kept going. Into the bushes and out of sight.

"She won't go far," Turpin said, squinting into the darkness. I heard her crashing through the brush, then there was nothing but silence.

"I'll call an alert." He strode out onto the portico, motioning to a running cop to take care of Henrietta. He walked off toward his car to make the call.

I turned back to the drawing-room. Meggles had collapsed on the couch. Martin was standing over him, swearing foully.

Martin looked up, horror and hatred in his eyes. He hated Meggles, and he hated me. I'd robbed him of a good thirty million dollar meal ticket.

"They would have been caught eventually."

"That's right," I answered, lighting another ciga-

"Do you think you're entitled to full payment?"

I looked over my shoulder. The Sheriff was out of sight and the cop was busy hoisting Henrietta in his arms. Meggles was whining and blubbering, face down on the couch. I came close to Martin, whispered, "It's up to you, Counsellor. Only the way I figure it, you must have had a few pinkies in the Sadler pies, too, or you would have noticed Meggles' juggling before this. I'd hate to have to hire myself out again to catch you."

He turned a lovely shade of eggshell white, and licked his lips. I smiled, blew smoke in his face, and walked out onto the portico, letting the chill of the night wrap me in quiet.

I drew deeply on the cigarette and thought of all the fine expensive clothes I could buy with that check.

THIS ABOVE ALL

by Leighla Whipper

AT TEN o'clock, Brock Wickersham settled himself at his desk and prepared to deal with his working day. It was always a good moment for him because he knew that his muted, well-appointed office reflected his recent success. Each morning he savored his expensive twentieth story view—the New York midtown skyline. He next would glance into the full-length smoked mirror on the opposite wall which his decorator had insisted would reflect that same skyline. "Twice your money's worth, Mr. Wickersham." Yet Mr. Wickersham was usually more interested in his own reflection.

He had managed to extract the ultimate from

plastic surgery. Who would ever guess that his nose had once been one full inch longer with a depressing tendency to curve downward. For that matter, who would know that his hair-line had been practically non-existent. It had been a real shame that at 43 he had lost most of it. Even as an ex-G.I. sitting in his classes at L'Alliance Francaise in Paris, his hair had been scanty. His medium build and harmless face was marred by his nose. Rarely did any of the girls say more than a casual "Good morning" or Bon jour" to him.

He had supposed that he was going to "write," and the daytime hours he spent with others of his kind in the bistro on Rue Fromentin in Monmartre sometimes convinced him that he could do it. Yet the nights were so different. Two post-war years of the cheap and chilly hotel with only two chapters of his novel finished convinced him that he was on the wrong side of the writing game. Even now he shivered and glanced at the door to reassure himself. In reverse lettering he read:

Wickersham Publishing Company
Brock Wickersham
President

The mirror told him his black crew-cut hair-piece was in place, that his now retroussé nose and the custom-tailored suit with the clever padding in the right places completed what amounted to his rebirth. He turned to his mail, finished it and pressed a buzzer. Rhoda entered, slim and chic in black. It flitted through his mind that few people would guess she was twenty-nine.

"How's it shaping up today, Rhoda?" he asked separating three letters from the others, "Any manuscripts come in?"

"Three today. One book of poems and two novels."

"And they all had letter number S-1?"

Rhoda smiled. "Oh yes. '*Crystal Wind* was one of

the most compelling novels we've ever come across and we are delighted to tell you we have accepted it for publication——' the usual thing."

"And what fee did you quote?"

"Three thousand each for the novels and two thousand for the poetry—a small manuscript."

"You had the blurbs printed up, of course, and enclosed them?"

He leaned back quite sure that Rhoda, dependable as always had done this. Hadn't they worked out the system through trial and error over the last five years? He well remembered his former one-room cubby hole—Rhoda fresh from college—her first job. He had sensed that efficiency had lurked behind those quiet blue eyes and that severely clipped dark hair-do. Of course she was difficult at first. She had wanted to be "fair" with the clients—tell them the true value of their work. He had quickly scotched that line, and little by little she had accepted his better judgement.

Under his leadership, it had developed that no matter how bad the manuscript, each client would first receive a letter couched in restrained but glowing terms saying how good it was. The next paragraphs told of their decision to publish it; then came the sure-fire appeal to the budding author. They were told of prospective cocktail parties to be attended by the elite of the New York book world—parties in *their* (the authors') honor. There would be also autograph sessions, advertisements in the trade papers and so forth. Then came the clincher—the gimmick—the fee, $3,000 or whatever the traffic would bear.

In most cases the vanity of the amateur writer would survive this last shock, and now, after five years, here he was, employing a large office staff and expanding every day. In the trade he was known as a "Vanity Publisher." This he did not mind at all. Of course there had been that unpleasantness with the government investigation, but he had managed

to survive that with a few changes in his wording of the letters.

"That's fine, Rhoda. Now here are three letters I want you to handle personally. The stationery is very good. There's money there. By the way how were those manuscripts really?"

"Lousy as usual, Brock." Her eyes clouded.

"Can't we ever get something we could be proud of?" he mused with a brief thought of his own writing aspirations.

"Only two decent manuscripts have I seen here in five years of publishing," Rhoda said bitterly, "But I want to talk to you about Wilma."

"What about her?" The tone of his voice sharpened as he sensed what was coming. It had happened before.

"Same thing. Doesn't think we're a legit outfit. Says her conscience—"

"Goddamn these editors who have a 'conscience!' " he exploded, quickly losing his studied poise. "I'm tired of people being so damn goody-goody and taking my hard-earned money as salary. Send her in!"

Rhoda, who knew this speech from memory rose to leave. Minutes later, he faced a rebellious looking girl with lank hair and bifocals.

"What I demand from my employees, Miss Jameson is loyalty! What's this about how we treat the clients and your 'conscience?' "

"Well—I—I thought we could have been more frank with the Carter manuscript and told him at the beginning that it was—"

"That his book would never sell after we had printed it?" He fit a cigarette in a holder and applied his lighter. "Tell Mr. Carter that his book was putrid—for that it is!"

"Well at least we didn't have to promise that—"

"Listen, Miss Jameson! I have never promised anything I didn't deliver. We tell our clients that *in our judgement* the manuscript is good. We never say that the critics or the public will like it. I never

promise them it will sell. I only say it *should* sell."

"But you promise the autographing parties and—"

"And I deliver the autographing parties. Why I've put myself out to supply good liquor for the trade and the editors of various book reviews. They're all invited! Can I help it if they never come? Can I help it if you and the other editors have to help drink up the cocktails and bring your mothers and so forth to fill out the crowd?"

"But those people get a vision of real fame—they think—"

"I have not risen where I am in this business trying to envisage what people think, Miss Jameson. I'm in business to make money and to make it without breaking the law—"

"Merely skirting the law," came the surprising comment from Miss Wilma Jameson.

She had touched his raw nerve, however. "Get your things from your desk, damnit, and by then I'll have your check ready. Just get out! Get out today!"

When the shaken girl had left, he calmed himself deliberately after a glance at his flushed face in his mirror. This didn't go with the poise of the Madison Avenue executive. Neither did it go with his doctor's advice to "take it easy," for one mild heart attack had marred his success story. A pity that plastic surgery had not rejuvenated his heart, he thought. He flicked the intercom.

"Rhoda?"

"Yes, Brock."

"What's the rest of my day? Heavy schedule?"

"Just a moment. I just handed it to your secretary . . . here it is. Lunch with Mrs. Devereaux—you know she's president of that woman's Pen Club out West . . ."

"Oh, God—"

"But she controls a club of forty women, all of whom write—"

"All right, I'll go through with it. What else?"

"I'm afraid I can't stall off Mr. Dillingham any

longer. He's set to see you right after lunch. He's threatened us—"

"O.K. I'll see him. I can handle him."

"Then there's Donald Penn to see at four."

"Not again!"

"He's just tying up the loose ends of that government investigation. Only the formalities."

"But somehow he's upsetting. O.K. Then can I get home early for a change. I think I have a date."

"Yes. I'll read the proofs of the Leslie novel. By the way, don't forget to take your medicine."

He smiled to himself. Trust Rhoda to think of everything. How well she knew he'd forget. "O.K. Now send my secretary in, please."

He had deliberately waited until this moment to see Angela Bryant. It didn't pay to give her too much authority until he was sure of her responsiveness. He picked up a letter. A small blonde girl entered with notebook and pencil. She paused a moment in the doorway and, as if gathering more courage, she took the chair opposite his desk.

"Good morning, Mr. Wickersham."

He looked up as though surprised. "Oh, good morning, Angela. Just a moment." He read through the letter for the third time. "Could you answer this without my dictating? You say you're an English major."

He noted how eagerly she took the letter to read. His eyes went over her feather coif, her pale nail polish, the neat but good dress.

"Yes, Mr. Wickersham, I can answer this myself, I think."

"That's what I like, Angela, cooperation. Of course, your typing hasn't been too good so far, but I like your spirit. You might really be a big help to me if you care to."

"I'd appreciate the chance, Mr. Wickersham."

"You see, Rhoda has been a sort of super-secretary around here beside her duties as Editor-in-Chief. But she really can't do it all. I need to be surrounded

by competent people who are not afraid of responsibility." He paused to have this sink in. "And I think you've got the qualities I want, Angela."

She kept her eyes on her notebook.

"First, complete loyalty. In the two months you've been here, I think you've shown this. Then you've shown initiative too. You can't imagine what I'm up against here, sometimes. I often feel that everything's against me."

Angela murmured a suitable reply. At this moment a telephone call came through. Both realized it had first been screened by Rhoda.

"Later, you'll screen my calls. Just a moment." He took the phone smiling into her eyes as he barked a business-like, "Wickersham here!" The smile soon faded as he recognized the voice of his divorced wife.

"Yes, Vera. No, Vera. I'm sure. Did you call Smythe and Smythe? I'll tell Rhoda to check it again."

There was a pause and Vera's unbridled comments were embarrassingly audible. He flushed and tried to keep his temper. When the tirade ceased he said with great effort, "I'll see to it right away."

He slammed the receiver down and turned to Angela. "You see, that's what I mean. I've paid that woman good alimony for two years now, and for some unknown reason whenever the check is the least bit late, she's ready to kill me!"

Angela looked sympathetic.

"But enough of that. Now I'd really like to give you some of the real facts and duties of this job. I won't have time here—too many interruptions. Let's get together at dinner—my apartment."

He saw her surprise and continued hurriedly. "Now now, don't think I'm such a big wolf—that's passé now. Just a conference."

"I didn't think—Of course I'll come."

"Shall we say at eight? It's the Riverview, Apartment 'C.' " He dismissed her after taking his program for the day from her. He noted that it would soon

be time to leave for lunch with that cow, Mrs. Devereaux. He realized he had not had time to establish what he called his rapport with the editors. He would do that on the way out.

Taking his hat, he went out for his daily round to the cubby-holes of his "girls."

"Hi, Deborah. What're you working on. The Goodrich biography? O.K. But did you make out that list of words I told you to? You know everybody's to make out their list, and a box of candy to the one with the best list—don't forget." Without pause for an answer, he went into the next office. "Helen? Good morning. Don't forget that list of words I want —words most likely to impress the clients. I'm going to select the best and have them typed and put on each editor's desk. I just spoke to Debbie about hers."

And so on down the line until he reached Rhoda's larger office near the door.

"Take care of things. I'll break away from Devereaux as soon as I can."

"I'm afraid you're in for it. She's already ordered a special lunch for you over at the Forum."

"Oh my God. That will take the whole afternoon to eat!"

"But forty novels at $3,000 apiece—"

"I really suffer for this business. You girls should be grateful to me. I tell you—"

"Don't be late, Brock. I'm sure we're all rooting for you. Chin up!"

The rest of the day was a nightmare. Mrs. Devereaux had indeed ordered a heavy and elaborate lunch and had been insistent that he eat it. She had gushed along during the entire meal saying that bachelors always neglected themselves. He could have kicked her on her hairy chin. Although he rushed the lunch, down to the exotic flaming dessert, it was still two hours before he returned to the office out of breath and with a feeling of discomfort

in the region of the stomach. Beside that, he had gotten stuck for the whopping big check. Was $40. worth it?

Then he next had to face Mr. Dillingham, an irate client who had seen through the machinations of the Wickersham Publishing Company and who now was in the process of finding he could do nothing about it."

"But Mr. Dillingham, I have every confidence that *Whispering Pines* will eventually sell. It takes time for books to catch on."

"Yes, but you promised you'd advertise in the *Times* book review section. You—"

"But I did. We carried the notice of your book in a full-page advertisement—"

"Along with exactly seventy other books!" I counted them. Mine was lost among them—buried!"

"I'm sure, Mr. Dillingham that you don't grudge our other authors."

"It isn't that I grudge them. You just didn't give me enough for my three thousand smackers. Why, I could have had a few hundred copies printed up for less than a third of that!"

"I'll only say, Mr. Dillingham," and here came the dignified withdrawal as he pressed the signal to be interrupted, "that your attitude is most surprising."

After a mottled Mr. Dillingham had been ushered out, there was that same investigator whom he had seen time and time again. This man from Washington had practically haunted his office for the past four months, prying around, asking embarrassing questions, going over the books, trying to catch him. His own lawyer had told him it was all finished, and now here he was faced with Donald Penn again. Furthermore he knew it would be useless to try to rush the man.

With fortitude he patiently braved the level brown eyes which rarely left his face. The voice was deceptively soft, but he had long ago recognized the timbre of authority behind it. A pang of resentment

had gone through him when he first had noted the naturally broad shoulders of Donald Penn. No tailor's tricks there. Those stupid editors had been impressed by this man, he remembered. All except Rhoda, no doubt. He hoped Angela would be as sensible—but at the same time more lovable.

"And as I understand your contracts, Mr. Wickersham, you do come through with everything promised? The expoitation, the quality of the paper and so forth."

"Absolutely, Mr. Penn. "We've been through all this before. They even get more than we promise. There is the editorial help I supply. Why, if I'd let some of those manuscripts go through as they come in—well!"

"Yes, I've just been talking again with some of the girls. They all seem to know their business."

"Yes. All of them are good. Rhoda's invaluable. They're true career girls." He wished his lunch would not rise to his throat. Damn that pig of a Devereaux woman. It tended to divert him from the business at hand. He wanted to match Penn stare for stare.

Penn finally rose. "I'm sorry to keep troubling you like this, but I admit your office really interested me. I didn't know subsidy publishers existed before this assignment. Won't be troubling you again soon, however. I'll be out of town for a few weeks."

Wickersham smiled with the right amount of martyrdom and self-righteousness. He flicked the intercom to tell Rhoda to close up the office in the faint hope of hurrying Penn along. She came in with the last letters for him to sign. He knew Penn would purposely try to leave the building with her as he had done before to engage her in more conversation. A fat lot he'd learn from Rhoda. Let them talk till doomsday.

It was a half hour later that he called it a day—a strangely tiring day. He reflected that perhaps some days had to be that way. Before he left he surveyed

his compact domain with deep satisfaction. He had made it. This office was his kingdom where he reigned each day—the well-being of his subjects in his hands. He was the one who could summon, hire, fire, suspend, yell at or croon to with impunity. He vaguely wished those girls in Paris could see him now, especially those American girls who had ignored him in class. Then there were those girls in high-school out West. Oh well, he was a new man now, anyway. He took a last glance around, snapped off the light and gently closed the door, entirely unaware of the fact that he would never see his office again.

The afternoon editions of the next day carried a brief account of the death of Brock Wickersham, president of the Wickersham Publishing Company, who had that morning been found dead in his apartment by his houseboy. Cause of death had been presumed a heart attack as he had suffered a milder one previously. One paper had thoughtfully placed the item on the same page on which there was an appeal for Heart Fund contributions.

When Donald Penn returned to New York two months later to learn of Wickersham's death, he found himself at a distinct loss. His own department in Washington had wound up the investigation of the Wickersham of the publishing world and had sent him along on an entirely new case. New York's finest had done all the work on the publisher's death, and he wondered why he remained so interested. It was really none of his business.

He had contacted some of the New York boys to find out some of the inner workings of their investigation. He learned that it had definitely been established that he died of a heart attack—the previous heart seizure was stressed. There had been an autopsy, and death had been due to natural causes. He learned that in view of the marginal nature of Wickersham's business, very thorough inquiries had

been made. His pills had been analyzed, the whole proceedings of the last few weeks of the dead man had been thoroughly probed. Denton, the man in charge, had been most kind to share the proceedings with him, and he knew that were it not for his own position with the investigation set-up in Washington, this would never have happened. He met him several times over a sociable drink, and even as he waited for him again in the noisy street level McAlpin bar, he thought of the recurring words—"the man was a real louse." His own knowledge of that was certain before the death.

"One bourbon on the rocks!" Denton's voice greeted him.

"I've already ordered it for you. Draw up a chair," he answered.

They exchanged pleasantries until his gnawing curiosity could no longer keep him from the subject. "Any number of people would have been glad to see him dead, right?"

Denton, a hard-bitten man, gave what passed for a smile. "Yep. His ex-wife, about a hundred clients, and at least twenty editors. He had a fast turn-over there. Fired mostly without notice, and no severance pay.

"But Rhoda Hill had been with him since he started."

"The only one too. Let me tell you she wasn't too popular with the girls who had been fired either. She was entirely the efficient Editor-in-Chief. If the girls ever had conscience-trouble, she saw that they left."

The waiter took their empty glasses as they re-ordered. Penn reflected upon Rhoda. She hadn't seemed the cold efficient type to him. Somehow those blue eyes seemed soft, the face composed but capable of emotion. He himself had to assume one face for his work and another for his private life.

"You guys interested in this case—you government guys?" Denton asked suddenly.

"We had just about finished with him. "Did you get cooperation from the office staff during the inquiry?"

"Couldn't have asked for more," Denton warmed to his subject. "It was ideal. Nobody held anything back. Even that spunky kid Angela Bryant came forward voluntarily to tell what happened the night before—"

"The night before he died? I missed this."

"A real important point," Denton replied. The guy was quite the wolf, you know. He'd been divorced a couple of years ago—boy, what a hellion he picked! Ex-show girl—brassy blonde and plenty bitchy. Now —this Angela Bryant girl. Apparently he had invited her to dinner at his apartment. It was all there, the wolf prowl setup. The hi-fi music, the candle-light, the whole bit."

"I remember Angela—a quiet sort of girl—a blonde."

"Yeah, he was partial to blondes. Well all of this was under the excuse of telling her about her duties —so her story went. Then he made his play. She did all right for a while—the room showed a real struggle. But in the end, he scored. His houseboy confirmed as much of this as he could without admitting he actually peeped. Probably didn't. I think it was an old story to him by then."

"I guess I was so busy analyzing the characters of the people he saw the last day—other than myself —that I missed this part. Not too surprising about the heart attack then?"

"No. I guess his last jump clinched it. It happened later toward morning we established."

"And who benefited from the death?"

"A brother. Not very close those two. Wickersham had broken away from his past, changed his name from an obviously European one to the veddy English 'Wickersham', changed his mode of living. His brother was pretty bewildered by it all. Knew nothing about running the business, left it in Rhoda's

hands and left for home as soon as he decently could."

"And business goes on as usual."

"Yep."

Penn frowned. Why in the world did he insist upon picking in this way at a finished case? Yet some inner voice told him there was something else. There was an illusive meaning—something indefinable that existed, yet that defied his detection. A devious plan came to him. It wouldn't hurt to have a little fling anyway. When he left Denton a hour later, he went to his hotel and composed thirty "poems", the like of which he had never hoped to see. Taking Walt Whitman as a point of departure, he wrote at random in an easy effort to make the work ludicrously inadequate. He succeeded. He wrapped his manuscript and mailed it at the nearest postoffice to the Wickersham Publishing Company after signing an outrageous "pen name."

A week later his letter came back. He read with fascination:

". . . and we are sorry to find your work not suitable for publication. We wish we could say your poems had the exact tone we are looking for. We suggest, however that you might, with time, reach the goal you have set for yourself, as poetry is certainly a subjective type of writing.

With best wishes,
(Signed) Rhoda Hill"

Now things were beginning to fall in place. He'd call her. Better still, he'd go over there. He wanted to look at that office with its new policy.

A new secretary-receptionist was there. No more Angela. He was shown in without waiting to what had been Wickersham's office. Rhoda rose to greet him.

"I'm glad to see you." She offered her hand, reaching over the desk to do so.

"I'm glad to see you too—so much has happened,"

he answered noting her black dress. She seemed always to wear black.

"Tragic things," she smiled gravely, then continued, "Now tell me if we're on the griddle again. More investigations?"

He laughed. "Not at all, Miss Hill. Just a social call. To the contrary, you've changed your policy, I believe."

"Oh we take things of real merit if that's what you mean. No more questionable badly-written manuscripts. Time will tell if we come out on top this way. It's a big gamble."

He wondered at her age. She looked twenty-five at most. Slim figure, sensitive face. If the dark hair were less severe, she might be called a beautiful girl.

"And where is Angela?" he asked.

"She's in the theatre now. Studying for it at any rate."

They were interrupted as a girl with lank hair and bifocals came in to place a manuscript on her desk.

"Thank you, Wilma," she said.

"Didn't I understand Wilma was fired?" he asked when the girl left.

"Yes, but some of the girls are back with us now that we've changed policy," she answered.

There was a pause. More light dawned upon him. He had almost caught the elusive "thing", or whatever one chose to call it. What a sensitive face. Suppose she hadn't really enjoyed hurting budding writers all these years.

"Would you have dinner with me tonight?" he asked.

She seemed surprised. He also saw something else in her eyes.

"I'd love to," she answered.

It took a full hour to make the arrangements, for Donald knew he was a perfectionist in such matters. The place, the wines, the menu, the music—all were important. He later picked her up at her mid-town apartment. When she stood at the door, he gasped.

She *was* beautiful. The hair, now fell about her shoulders in controlled confusion. She wore the mink cape most New York women wear in the Spring, and he was sure her dress (not black, but a deep violet) was high coutoure.

After the superb dinner he let his talk drift to Wickersham.

"I've been waiting for this moment," she told him. "Naturally, this is what you wanted to speak of the entire evening."

Slightly taken aback, he replied, "Naturally. Just let me talk, and let me look into your eyes which I hope are heavy-lidded with wine. Just answer 'yes', or 'no'."

"But not before I tell you that Brock Wickersham died a natural death," she said to his surprise.

"I'm sure he did," he managed to answer. "The entire point is that. It was a real heart attack."

"Yes, that's what killed him."

"He admired me even more. Somehow he had always been attracted to women who knew what they wanted. 'You always wanted a legitimate business didn't you, Rhoda?' "

"Yes."

"At first you often suggested it in a diplomatic way to Wickersham, didn't you. Then you knew you'd be fired if you persisted."

"Yes."

"Because it went against your grain to have to exercise the brutal office policies—deception of the clients and all."

"Yes. Also if someone had a 'conscience,' I didn't ever want them to go against it."

"You knew Wickersham better than anyone else in the world."

"Yes."

"You therefore knew best what could bring on his demise."

She hedged on that one. "Really, Mr. Penn. That's rather—"

"You did your job well, but after five years you decided it was enough."

They looked at each other with new understanding. "I'm sure I could find out who suggested that heavy lunch to Mrs. Devereaux. I'm sure Angela now has money for her courses in the New Actors' School."

"Really?"

"She was recruited from the ranks of the great theatrical unemployed. She was a very bad typist wasn't she?"

"But she was so decorative."

"And just Wickersham's type," he answered wondering why he took her hand in his. "Wasn't it a bit out of character for the gentle Angela to struggle so fiercely that night in Wickersham's apartment?"

"She was protecting her honor!"

"And practically finishing up a man with a bad heart. Now about Mr. Dillingham's visit. You could easily have kept him away had you wanted to. You had managed to keep me well away for two days. Your timing was perfect. Dillingham upset him too!"

Her hand nestled in his. "There's a mistake men of the law make too often. They tend to complicate things. If poor Brock hadn't died on that day, his temperament obviously would have brought on death shortly thereafter. One can't predict the exact hour."

"You're a genius," he told her.

"And very patient," she answered.

He looked at her with alarm. Suddenly he knew the real truth. He had ignored his own danger. He hadn't a chance.

"With the Mendelian law," she was saying, "I understand that if a person with blue eyes marries a person with brown eyes, the chances are that more children of that marriage will have brown eyes than blue."

"I've always wanted four children," he found himself saying.

TEN LOST BOMBS

by John Jakes

THE U. S. Army jeep lurched and veered along the Avenue of the Fishes.

In the front seat Major Frederick Brainie of G2 made an urgent signal. The jeep's driver sawed on the wheel as the vehicle tore through several huge puddles left by the previous night's rainstorm, showering water on shrilly protesting Japanese who thronged the Tokyo street. Captain Detona wrestled the wheel; splashing through the puddles had wetted and temporarily knocked out most of the vehicle's braking power.

In the rear seat Roger clutched his cane. Up ahead, where the Avenue of the Fishes descended toward

a lagoon gleaming several blocks distant, a gray-painted panel truck with the words *Operation Friendship* stenciled on its sides had come to a halt. Crowds of children thronged around it, hands waving, voices raised in eager singsong.

The jeep nearly plowed into the side of a sukiyaki establishment before Detona succeeded in stopping it. Major Brainie leaped out, sweating.

"My God, look at the mobs," he said anxiously. An attractive brunette girl had emerged from the panel truck a block away. The children set up a fierce clamor. "If one, even one of those bombs explodes in this street we'll be hunting corpses for weeks."

"There's only one answer," said Captain Detona, lugging a black case containing his anti-demolition equipment from the seat. "Drown those bombs in a bucket of water."

"If that babe lets us near her," Brainie returned.

Roger climbed stiffly from the jeep, leaning on his cane. What a vacation. He was supposed to be recovering from a leg injury received while on assignment in Liverpool. Instead he found himself staring down the street at the brunette, fascinated. He'd last seen Miss Clarissa Erie Fiske of the Philadelphia 400 at a Washington charity ball . . . oh, all of five years ago. Roger, however, was given no opportunity to meditate on the past. Brainie clutched his arm, also unloosing the flap of his heavy holster.

"Come on, Roger. This is your play. I explained how far we'll get with that bimbo. Since the State Department, those knuckleheads, gave her so much trouble, anything stamped government issue, smells."

"Sure lucky we ran into you at the Fuji Club like that," commented Captain Detona.

"It certainly is," said Roger without much enthusiasm. He felt as though he were about to stab a charming, attractive friend right in the back.

On the other hand, as he, Detona and Brainie proceeded through the jam-packed street toward the children gathered more than a hundred strong about

the Friendship truck, Roger experienced a distinct chill on his spine. Ten small, wicked anti-personnel bombs exploding in such confined quarters would have murderous effect.

"She's seen us," the thick-necked Brainie remarked when they were a block away.

"Now she's spotted you," added Captain Detona a moment later. "Would you ever figure a nifty number stacked like that would be so mean? Wow, look at her scowl. I didn't know they taught 'em temper at Vassar." He slapped Roger's back. "All yours, Roger."

A moment earlier, Clarissa Erie Fiske had been smiling and chattering in Japanese to the hundred or so ragged, grinning urchins clustered around her truck. But as she sighted the trio of men marching determinedly toward her, an expression of surprise crossed her pretty face, followed a moment later by one of anger and extreme resolution. Poised above the heads of the children on the elevated step of the truck, Clarissa delivered a withering glance at Roger. Pressing his way through the crowd, Roger waved feebly. Unceremoniously Roger thrust aside an emaciated American equipped with bowler, umbrella and attaché case who was also struggling through the press of children. Roger and his army companions left this individual fighting in the back of the crowd as they came up to where Clarissa stood.

"Children," Clarissa called in makeshift Japanese, "there'll be a moment of delay . . . but don't leave. In a second I'll have candy and chewing gum and pencils, paper and crayons for everyone. Compliments of a group of private United States citizens," she exclaimed for the benefit of the officers, "whose efforts to do a little good for others are unsubsidized and unapproved by the red-tape bureaucrats of the glorious American State Department."

"Lady, you better shut the hell up with that kind of talk," said Major Brainie from the side of his mouth. "The State Department demands at least

minimum politeness when a request . . ."

"Bosh!" Clarissa said. "Papers in quadruplicate, forms and clearances . . . I'd be rotting in a waiting room in Washington for official permission right now, if I'd put up with all their silly routine."

The girl directed a venomous glance at Roger. "What are you doing here, Roger? Did they send you to serve a warrant for arrest? I don't doubt it. Helping poor, innocent, starving people is a crime unless some pork-barreller gets his hand in."

"Clarissa, let me explain a second," Roger said. "Can't you get rid of some of these kids?" A Japanese boy had just stepped on Roger's foot. Another elbowed his stomach. Dozens of hungry, pleading hands waved. Voices yammered eagerly for candy bars.

"I cannot," returned Clarissa archly. "I'm going to distribute my things on schedule."

"You may get blown to kingdom come if you do," Captain Detona said.

Clarissa started. "Blown to . . . ?"

"Keep your voices down!" Brainie colored an apoplectic red. "Some of these kids may understand . . . if they panic it'll be as bad as the bombs going off."

"Bombs?" Clarissa screeched. "Will you kindly tell me what this is all about?"

Roger limped a step forward with his cane, shoved and buffeted by the children. "He's telling the truth, Clarissa. The Major is from Intelligence. The Captain is a demolitions man. It seems there's a company in Tokyo called O. Yoshida Novelty Distributors Limited . . ."

"Of course," Clarissa replied. "That's where I buy the crayons and candy and things. It's much better to buy them locally than to bring them from America. Helps the economy."

"In this case Mr. Yoshida wasn't interested in helping the economy," Roger said. "Just the opposite. Brainie's group discovered that Yoshida and his

bunch were espionage people. They had all sorts of incendiary apparatus and small bombs in their warehouse. It was raided last night. But one of the boxes of ball-point pencils Yoshida sold you by mistake contained ten little anti-personnel bombs. They look just like all the other pencils in the box, but if you start fiddling with them . . . bam. Captain Detona has to go through the boxes of pencils and put the ten bad ones in water before anyone is blown up."

"No bull, Miss Fiske," said Brainie. "You pass them to the kids, somebody gets hurt."

"You haven't distributed any of them yet, have you?" asked Detona. "I mean, you didn't make any stops before you came here this morning, did you?"

Clarissa Erie Fiske hesitated. "No, but . . . Roger, what's your part in all this?"

"I met these gentlemen by accident. It turned out I knew you. When they described how you might react to a couple of army officers, I thought I'd better come along."

"You're a contemptible worm," said Clarissa, smiling. "And it's a pretty feeble story."

"Clarissa, for God's sake believe me!" said Roger. "It's gospel truth."

"Just a moment, children," Clarissa called to the crowd of youngsters setting up such a ferocious howl that she could barely be heard. "I'll send these bureaucrats packing in a second. Then we can get down to business."

To Roger she said, "I'm not buying, dear."

Major Brainie fingered the flap of his heavy holster. "Miss Fiske, I warn you . . .

"It's a State Department trick!" she exclaimed. "The fuddy-duddies in Washington can't stand to see anyone spread a little good will without official blessing. They've sent you here to try and get me off the streets. Well, I'm not having any. Next thing you know, I'll be arrested and sent into political exile. Excuse me, gentlemen, I'm busy."

"Clarissa, that temper of yours never did you any

good . . ." began Roger.

"Miss Fiske, oh, Miss Fiske!" piped a feeble voice somewhere to the rear of the crowd. Roger and the rest, including Clarissa, ignored it. A little speculative smile played in Clarissa's pretty eyes and across her full mouth. For a moment she stared at Roger. He had difficulty estimating her thoughts. Then she brightened. Her smile grew a shade wider.

"Of course I wouldn't want any of these sweet children to be injured on my account. I suppose it wouldn't do any harm to let you look through the pencils, if you won't bother me when you're finished. Just a moment. I'll bring the boxes out." Mounting to the interior of the open driver's section of the truck, Clarissa looked at Roger. "I always did have a soft spot for you, you glib wretch. That night in Washington . . ."

With a mysterious smile Clarissa vanished into the rear of the truck. Roger, Detona and Brainie exchanged satisfied glances. Detona kept nervously eyeing boxes of candy stacked just behind the bucket seat of the truck.

"Here's what I have for you," trilled Clarissa, back in sight.

Shrieks of alarm went up from a hundred childish throats. Clarissa held a pistol.

"You sneaks! I've been prepared for something like this. It'll take more than a phony yarn about bombs to get me off the street. You and that bunch of gray-beards in the State Department may think I'm a busybody, but I think the same about you." Clarissa raised her voice. "Children, I'll come back again, but right now I must leave for a little while. If I don't, these gentlemen are going to see that you never taste a candy bar again."

Clarissa flipped a key. The truck's engine roared. Children scattered. Clarissa dropped into the seat and engaged the gears, menacing Roger and the soldiers with the gun.

"Lady, you're going to be held responsible for . . ."

began Detona darkly.

"Go tell it to Christian Herter," Clarissa said. "In quintuplicate."

As the truck began to slowly roll, Roger leaped onto the steps and pushed Clarissa out of the driver's chair. He jerked the wheel to avoid a group of scattering children. Clarissa lost her gun as the truck lurched. She hung on to the doorframe on the other side.

"Have you lost your mind?" she cried.

"No," shouted Roger, beeping the horn. "Changed it. Let's ditch the troops."

Roger shoved the accelerator toward the floor. All along the Avenue of the Fishes Japanese citizens spotted the truck hurtling toward them and flung themselves out of the way. For a moment Clarissa stared at Roger quizzically. Then a smile lighted her face. She lurched against Roger and hugged him, knocking off his hat. Roger's cane flew out the open door of the truck. The vehicle crashed through one wide puddle of standing water, then another, then a third. Clarissa noticed their mounting speed.

"Better turn off at the next corner," she said. "Roger? Do you hear me? Turn . . ."

". . . leave those meddlers right back there where they belong," Roger was growling.

"Roger, for heaven's sake, slow down! You can't make the turn if you don't . . ."

The truck smashed through two more puddles. Spouts of water rose on either side. Outraged and sopping citizens shook their fists as the truck shot by. Roger tramped on the brake pedal. The wheels sawed. The truck veered in a crazy S-curve down the middle of the brick avenue. Ahead, Japanese housewives picked up their tubs of laundry and fled.

". . . Roger, in the name of heaven, slow down . . . the lagoon . . ."

"Can't stop!" Roger exclaimed over the roar of the engine and the cries of the crowd. "Driving too fast. Brakes wet. Can't do a thing. Better jump, Clarissa.

Quick . . . !"

But it was too late for jumping. As the last of the local laundresses leaped aside, the Operation Friendship truck shot over the cross-way running parallel to the lagoon. Just as Roger engaged gears and slowed slightly the front tires cleared the edge of the paving stones. A moment later the truck was above water. Then with a crash and a hiss it struck and rolled over.

Roger moved rapidly, shoving Clarissa out through the open door and kicking after her. Sputtering and gasping for air, they struggled upright a moment later, able to stand erect on the bottom in the five-foot depth. But the Friendship truck had turned on its side, nearly immersed. Candy bars and colored sheets of paper began to float on the lagoon. Clarissa pushed a strand of hair out of her eyes, raging.

"You . . . you cheat! You monster!" she cried. "Wrecking my only truck . . . !"

"We'll get another one," Roger said. "Clarissa, it was the only way . . ."

"The only way?" Splashing, she advanced through the water. "I'll show you the only way to crack a man's head open. Like this, you . . ."

She stopped.

On the edge of the lagoon Major Brainie, Detona and the unknown American in bowler and umbrella stood gesturing frantically. The bowlered person waved his attaché case. ". . . Snell, Foster Snell," came his voice drifting over the water. ". . . State Department . . . authorization . . . commendation . . . President . . . give you official status . . . misunderstanding . . . sorry . . ."

Clarissa Erie Fiske goggled. The Japanese citizenry mobbing the lagoon banks in wide-eyed wonderment were treated to the unusual sight of a young debutante giving a kiss to a bedraggled man while both of them stood nearly up to their necks in water, with Hershey bars floating on every hand.

DRY DUST

by Judith Merril

STEVE ANDERSEN was thirsty. He let his body go limp against the jouncing of the buckboard, and felt the sun beating on his head right through his cap, making him even thirstier. Every rod of the way to town, his thirst seemed to double. A man could get awfully dry around a lot of water.

He felt the pouch in his vest pocket, and wished he hadn't brought it. He thought of tossing it out along the roadside, and stopping for it later, on his way back from town. He thought that he didn't even have to stop for it. It was only a sample. There was plenty more where that came from.

He even took it out of his pocket, and looked at it,

and tried to toss it out, but it seemed like it had got stuck to his hand. Better not to just toss it out, anyhow, he thought. Better to find a good spot that he'd be sure to recognize on the way back. There was plenty more, maybe, but a man didn't throw gold away. And somebody else might find it. That would be as bad as if he took it to town.

A hundred yards down the road, he found a spot. It was a rock formation he knew, and around to the side in back there was a little crevice where he and Betty had put the berries to keep them safe that time. Nobody would ever find it, unless they went to look.

Steve stopped the horse, and got down, and walked all the way around to the little crevice. He put the pouch in, and covered it with some loose dirt, and took a few steps away. Then he stopped to look back, and it didn't look right. Anybody would know there was something cached there. He went back, and brushed the dirt away, and picked up the pouch, and then ran back to the buckboard with it, without thinking, without letting himself think any more about leaving it behind. He was very thirsty.

Maybe this time Coleman would let him have a bottle. Payday was about due anyhow. Maybe he could say it was for Marshall.

He realized that wouldn't work. Marshall had written the order, and sealed it. If he wanted whiskey he would have said so, right on the list. Marshall should have given him some money, anyhow, he thought angrily, or he should have ordered some drinking liquor on his list. You can't keep a bunch of men working like dogs for a week with nothing but water to drink and then pick out one of them, just like that, and send him into town, thirsty, and without any money.

And it wasn't just Steve, either. It was all of them. Marshall said if they kept quiet, Sutter would be handing out the hard stuff, but all the drinks they got out of him you could squeeze out of a stone

above timber level on a hot day. There were times when a man needed a drink. Marshall ought to know that.

The more he thought about it, the more it seemed to Steve that Marshall did know. There was bound to be something drinkable on that list. Marshall had promised drinks all around when the old man came out, and if the old man didn't make it good, Marshall would. He was a good boss.

Steve drove into town feeling pretty good. Coloma wasn't much to look at, but it had a good store, and the store carried good whiskey, as whiskey went in that godforsaken part of the universe. Steve went on into Coleman's feeling as good as he had when he first got that pouch filled up. It was damn near burning a hole in his vest pocket right now, but it was good the way it felt. Warm. Golden warm.

Coleman nodded to him from across the counter. Steve tried to ignore the knowing grin in the storekeeper's eyes as his own eyes swivelled automatically to the case way off in the left corner, where the bottled goods were kept. He grinned back, feeling that warm glow in his vest pocket, and knowing he could count on having enough to buy Coleman out, have it in a month, maybe in a week, if nothing went wrong now. He grinned, and thought, for all his wise looks, there were a few things Coleman *didn't* know. And he damn sure wasn't going to find out from Steve Andersen.

"What'll it be, Steve?" The storekeeper's voice was friendly, even if it was laughing a little. "Can I sell you a couple bottles today? Or maybe a half-dozen?"

"Sell 'em to Marshall," Steve said. He handed over the list. "I think us boys are drinkin' on the old man this week."

"You must be doin' a hell of a job out there, then," Coleman said idly, ripping open the envelope. "Old man Sutter starts charging up his men's drinkin' lickers on his own bill, it'll be a big day for

Californy."

"The rate he's goin'," Steve agreed, "he started buying for all 'is boys, he'd be keepin' most of the territory in drinks. That man's goin' farther 'n faster than it seems a man ought to."

"You're thirsty, Steve." Coleman grinned at him. "You don't never talk like that when you aint. An' what's more," he put the list down on the counter. "You're gonna wait some time to get undried, too. You had a bad hunch that time, son."

"You mean Marshall forgot to put it down? You mean there aint no whiskey on that list?" Steve didn't quite understand at first. He was so sure it would be there. It *had* to be there.

"There ain't even a bottle of beer wrote down here."

Coleman wandered off to the back of the store, and Steve let himself fall into a chair. He felt as if he'd been hit in the stomach. It was that hard to take. He *knew* Marshall had put it down. Marshall was no fool; he promised liquor to the men before the old man came out, and he had to give it to them, didn't he?

He remembered what Marshall had said before he left, about cutting his own throat, if he let anybody in on it. That was one smart man. If the liquor wasn't down there, Marshall had just forgot, and he, Steve, could come back in for it the same day.

He thought about that while Coleman moved around in back, and then he realized that was no good. Even if Marshall had meant to put it down, he wasn't going to lose another half day's work to get it. They still had a mill to build, gold or no gold.

Steve sat quietly until Coleman had the provisions stacked up on the platform, ready to load on the buckboard. Then he walked over to the storekeeper, and started to ask him, but Coleman got there before he did.

"I just can't do it, Steve." He shook his head emphatically. "I broke that rule, I'd be out of busi-

ness in a week. Licker comes for cash, and not no other way."

Steve wanted to hit the other man, but Coleman looked so little and so soft, he turned around to the crates, and started piling them on the board, throwing them hard and fast to work it out of him. He had to get away, too, get away fast, before something happened.

Coleman was watching him, curious. The storekeeper didn't know how close he'd come to getting painted over the floor, and leaving the floor a bright red. There were lots of things he could have said, but he said the wrong thing.

"You're gonna get thirstier, working so hard in the sun, Steve. And you might break somethin' . . . if there was anythin' breakable, that is."

Something snapped. Steve heard Marshall's voice, again, saying, "Steve if you blab, I'll break every bone in your body, me, personally, and every man here'll help me. If you can just keep your mouth shut, once, we're all gonna be millionaires."

He heard it, but he was dry. And when he heard Coleman's voice, too, it was too much.

He let the crate in his hand drop on the platform floor, and said, in a voice that didn't sound much like the one God had equipped him with, "Say, I'll take a quart of your best, *Mister* Coleman."

The storekeeper was scared, now. He realized he'd done something, only he didn't know what. Steve saw he was scared, too, and that felt good.

"Look, Steve, let me give you a hand with the loading, and get on back before there's trouble." Coleman was pleading with him, and Steve loved it.

"I want a quart of the best, I said."

He marched into the store, and the storekeeper followed him. Steve went right on to the counter, and opened up his vest, and pulled out the pouch. He threw it down on the counter, and waited while Coleman came around to the back.

"Open it." He waved the storekeeper to the bag

on the counter. "Go on, open it."

Coleman looked at it. He didn't want to touch it, but he was afraid not to. He would have given Steve the bottle right then, rather than open that pouch, but he knew he had to.

He tugged at the strings a little, and it fell out. From the top, from the tiny little opening, a stream of gilt dust poured onto the counter.

The sight of it did something to Steve. He stopped cold, and his face must have changed, and he knew his voice did. Coleman saw it, too, and wasn't afraid any more.

Coleman laughed, a little hysterically, in relief.

"What's that supposed to be?" he demanded. "What's all the fuss about?"

"Gold," Steve said, and it was almost a sob. "Gold, from Sutter's Mill."

Coleman laughed again, laughed as if he didn't believe it. Or as if he didn't want Steve to think he believed it. He reached into the case, and pulled out a bottle, and handed it to Steve over the counter.

"Here," he said. "Take your bag of pretty dirt." He shoved it over to Steve, letting a thin trickle escape along the counter.

Steve looked at the bottle, and picked up the pouch, and turned around, not thinking any thoughts at all.

When he got out to the buckboard, Coleman was there with him. The storekeeper stayed there, and helped him load on the last crates. Then Steve got in himself, and picked up the reins, and he was ready to say "Giddyap," when Coleman slid into the seat beside him.

"Think I'll ride out with you, Steve. Anybody else out there fooling around with this, I ought to let 'em know there ain't no gold at Sutter's Mill."

The water was warm and infinitely soothing—and made her wonder, for a moment, if her course was the right one. Her first reaction had been to smash—to rip things wide—simply for the balm of a revenge, whether or not it'd be costly. She was alone in the comforting water—but suddenly the sense of solitude was gone—and, seconds later, she screamed as the hands neared, in—

RUFUS KING'S
LET HER KILL HERSELF

The rich old witches had said, "Get Scodell," and when they asked for something, smart operators did not refuse. Even when there was murder in the background—a frighteningly different kind of murder—as in—

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